through pregnancy and birth, and where things stood for them at the present. We also learned much about how motherhood had affected their lives. Women openly, and often eagerly, shared life lessons they had learned about relationships, marriage, and children. We share their stories in the pages that follow.

ONE

“BEFORE WE HAD A BABY . . .”

ANTONIA AND EMILIO

Antonia Rodriguez and her boyfriend Emilio, a young Puerto Rican couple, live in Philadelphia’s West Kensington section, colloquially dubbed “the Badlands” because of all the drug activity and violence there. Both sides of their block are lined with small, unadorned row homes, some well over a hundred years old. A century and a half ago, this densely populated neighborhood was home to hundreds of small manufacturing concerns. Though few of these businesses exist today, the America Street Enterprise Zone, one of four such zones within Philadelphia, has revived some of the area’s industrial vigor. Antonia and Emilio’s immediate neighborhood is a mix of industrial strips, residential blocks, and narrow thoroughfares choked with small businesses, including an astonishing number of storefronts offering auto repair, auto parts, and auto detailing—trades that provide an economic niche for Philadelphia’s Puerto Rican men.

Twenty-year-old Antonia is slight, with shoulder-length brown hair, large brown eyes, and a warm, friendly manner. She invites us in through the enclosed porch, and as we move through the living room to the kitchen, she proudly points to renovations that she and Emilio have made to the tiny row home since they bought it five years ago, when the me-
dian price of a home in the neighborhood was about $5,000. After we settle around the table in her newly remodeled kitchen, Antonia tells us she is the youngest of three children from her mother's first marriage and the black sheep of her Catholic family. Antonia’s older brother and sister both graduated from high school and have stable jobs, one in the military and one at a mortgage company. Her sister also has a child, but she is married to the father. Antonia describes her sister as her “very best role model.”

Unlike her siblings, Antonia became a parent very young—at fourteen—and left high school at fifteen. She’s been unemployed and on welfare ever since, except for a brief stint behind the counter at McDonald’s. Yet Antonia sees herself as bright and ambitious and believes she will go somewhere. She is sorry she didn’t graduate from high school with her peers and “march down that aisle, have all those memories.” She also regrets that the pregnancy prompted Emilio, whom she describes as very smart, to drop out just one month shy of graduation so that he could work full time and support his new family.

Antonia met Emilio when she was eleven and he was sixteen, about to enter his sophomore year at Edison High. “I always liked him,” Antonia recalls. “I thought he was handsome. But he never paid no mind to me because I was young.” She soon found out that his aunt, whom he often visited, lived next door to her own family, so Antonia spent much of the summer between the sixth and seventh grade camped out on her front stoop hoping to capture his attention. “I always told [his aunt], ‘Tell him to just stop by to say hi. I’m not gonna bite him.’”

Two summers after she developed her crush, Emilio “walked by, he stopped, and we started talking ever since.” In Philadelphia’s poorest neighborhoods, “talking” is a handy euphemism for anything from casual flirting to sex. Antonia’s problems at home and the frequent angry confrontations with her mother, whom she describes as verbally abusive, took her relationship with Emilio to the next level with breathtaking swiftness. When Antonia’s mother evicted her at age fourteen, Emilio convinced his mother to let Antonia live with them. Soon after moving in, Antonia started “feeling kind of sick and hungry.” Since they were not using any form of birth control, she immediately thought she knew the cause. “I said, ‘Oh my God, I think I’m pregnant.’” After a positive home pregnancy test, Antonia and an older cousin did what many other low-income young women in her position do: they quickly made a furtive trip to Planned Parenthood to confirm the results. When the test “came out positive,” Antonia was “happy, but then again I was scared because I was only—what?—fourteen years old.”

Despite their youth, Antonia insists she and Emilio had already planned to have children before she got pregnant, but had agreed to wait a year or two so both could get further in school. In the half-year before the child was conceived, Antonia says she and Emilio spent hours imagining, “If in the future we have kids ... I wonder who he’ll look like. Yeah that’ll be great ... ” Yet neither anticipated that the first pregnancy would occur less than six months into their relationship. The pair nonetheless dealt with the situation in what they deemed the only responsible way: “I didn’t think I was gonna have a child at [such] an early age, but I faced it. We faced reality, and we moved on.” Emilio faced it by looking for an apartment where they could set up housekeeping on their own. Shortly thereafter, he dropped out of school and began working two jobs to finance the move—a weekend job at Checkers, a local fast-food joint, and a weekday job as a mechanic in his uncle’s garage.

Pregnant by fourteen, a high school dropout at fifteen, and already a mother performing all the tasks of a wife—just when other girls her age are merely hoping to get a learner’s permit to drive a car—Antonia is no neighborhood success story. But in poor neighborhoods like West Kensington, where Antonia has lived all her life, the haphazard way she and Emilio embarked upon family life is hardly unusual. Across the city of Philadelphia, more than six out of ten births are now outside of marriage, many to couples whose circumstances are no better than Antonia and Emilio’s. And though Antonia may have been younger than most single
mothers when she had her first child, nearly half of all first nonmarital births are to teens.1

What forces compel childbearing among the poor at a time in the life course when most of their affluent peers probably worry about whom to invite to the prom? To answer this question, we share parts of the hundreds of in-depth conversations held on front stoops and in the kitchens of these bleak urban neighborhoods. The stories of those we spoke with offer an intimate look into the private moments of courtship, as well as the drama of how relationships unfold during the often tumultuous experience of pregnancy and childbirth. Women’s voices tell the stories; the perspectives of the men who father their children are not heard.4 But as you will see, these women have their own theories of why the men in their lives behave as they do.

“J WANNA HAVE A BABY BY YOU.”

Like Antonia Rodriguez, young women who come of age in poor communities like West Kensington usually meet the men who father their children in their neighborhoods: on their front stoops, at the corner store, in their school hallways, or through mutual friends. Yet once a young pair begins casually flirting, or “kicking it,” the relationship often moves at lightning speed along the trajectory that culminates in the delivery of a shared child. Kimberly, a twenty-seven-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two children, ages six and three, provides an excellent example: “There’s this bridge in Puerto Rico that he took me to [on our first date]. That’s where he asked me to be his girlfriend. That’s where we had our first kiss. . . . It was really nice. I got pregnant quick though. We started [dating] April 1, and by May I was pregnant.”

Romance and dreams of shared children seem almost inevitably to go together for Madeline, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-month-old, who casually explains, “In the beginning, when you first like a guy a lot, oh, you wanna have his baby.”6 And young women are not the only dreamers. Lisa, white and thirty-two, now a mother of two teenagers, recalls that her children’s father announced his desire to father a child by her almost immediately after they met. “From day one . . . I’d say within a week . . . of being with him, he wanted to have a baby by me. He talked about how pregnant women are beautiful and it’d be beautiful if we had a baby.”

To the outside observer, begging one’s girlfriend for a baby just days or weeks after initiating a new romance might seem to be little more than a cynical pickup line, and that is certainly how it is sometimes used. But in the social world of young people like Antonia and Emilio, nearly everyone knows that a young man who proclaims his desire to have a baby by a young woman is offering high tribute to her beauty, for this avowal expresses a desire for a child that will have her eyes and her smile. The statement’s significance extends beyond praise for her physical charms, though. A man who says these words with sincerity bestows an even higher form of flattery: he is the kind of woman he is willing to entrust with the upbringing of his progeny, his own flesh and blood. Yet expressing the desire to have a baby together is far from a promise of lifelong commitment. What it does reflect is the desire to create some sort of significant, long-lasting bond through a child. Lena, a white mother of a one-year-old, who is only fifteen when we talk with her, says her boyfriend told her he “wanted to get me pregnant . . . so that I won’t leave him. So that I’ll stay with him forever. Then he said [to me], ‘When you have kids by somebody, they’ll always go back to you.’” And when Lisette, an eighteen-year-old African American mother of two toddlers, discovered she was pregnant, “[The father] said to me, ‘You know, I got you pregnant on purpose because I want you in my life for the rest of my life.’” For Lena and Lisette and the men in their lives, marriage is both fragile and rare, and the bond that shared children create may be the most significant and enduring tie available.

The heady significance of the declaration “I want to have a baby by you” is also fueled by the extraordinarily high social value the poor place on children. For a lack of compelling alternatives, poor youth like Antonia and Emilio often begin to eagerly anticipate children and the social
role of parents at a remarkably tender age. While middle-class teens and twenty-somethings anticipate completing college and embarking on careers, their lower-class counterparts can only dream of such glories. Though some do aspire to these goals, the practical steps necessary to reach them are often a mystery. We return to this theme in chapter 6.

African American, sixteen-year-old Brehanna conceived a child when she and her boyfriend Jason were only fourteen. Her sister too had her first child young, and Brehanna says she wants to be just like her. This high school dropout from East Camden, now a telemarketer, tells us that from the early days of their courtship, “We was always going out to the mall and going [window] shopping for [baby things]. We always talked about having a baby. We used to always talk about having kids and everything.”

Thoughts of children—when to have them, who with, what they’ll be like—often preoccupy the hopes and dreams of Brehanna, Jason, and their peers throughout adolescence and into the early adult years. Visions of shared children stand in vivid, living color against a monochromatic backdrop of otherwise dismal prospects. An unabashed confidence that they’re up to the job of parenting feeds the focus on children that most poor youth display, and this is at least partly because they’ve already mastered many of its mechanics. This point was brought home when one of us (Edin) was asked to speak about urban poverty to a group of several dozen Camden middle school youth in a summer employment program. While she talked, her daughter Kaitlin, then three, toddled around in the middle of the room. Suddenly, the child tripped and fell. Almost instantly two-thirds of the youth were on their feet, ready to spring into action on her behalf. While she’d been talking, most of her young audience had been listening with one ear while at the same time closely monitoring the child, and they were doing so out of habit—something she could not imagine herself having done at the same age. Inspired by this insight, she asked, “How many of you help take care of younger siblings or cousins?”

Almost all raised their hands. Then she asked, “How many of you know how to change a diaper and make up a bottle?” Again, dozens of hands shot up in the air. “I didn’t know how to do either until I was thirty and had a baby!” she admitted to the group.

A childhood embedded in a social network rich with children—younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews, and the children of friends—creates the illusion of a near Dr. Spock-like competence in childrearing. Tatiana, a twenty-two-year-old African American mother of two preschoolers and a first grader, brags, “My sister used to make me have my niece all the time. I really had experience. . . . I had a lot of experience.” Sonia, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican with a three-year-old son, says the prospect of becoming a mother at eighteen didn’t scare her because, “I was the responsible one. I was already a mom. . . . I would cook, clean, do everything else. . . . I’ve always been a mom. That’s why it wasn’t nothing new to me.” Destiny, an eighteen-year-old white mother of two toddlers, explains, “When we were living with my mom, I was taking care of my little sister and my little brother anyway. She was working two jobs, so I was taking care of them mostly. I got patience, a lot of patience. It wasn’t like I wasn’t able to take care of no kids anyway!”

“MY DAUGHTER WAS DEFINITELY PLANNED.
I WANTED A KID!”

Children come early to couples in West Kensington and other decaying neighborhoods in Philadelphia’s inner core—indeed, most conceive their first child within a year of being together. As talk of shared children is part of the romantic dialogue poor young couples engage in from the earliest days of courtship, this is not surprising. Nonetheless, for these mothers, only one in four children is conceived according to an explicit plan—about one in five for our African American and Puerto Rican mothers, and one in ten for our whites (see appendix A).

Some youth decide to begin trying to get pregnant so they can escape a troubled home life. Roxanne, a white mother of an adult child, a teenager, and a one-year-old, now in her early forties, recalls the first time she and her boyfriend had sex. “We went down to the shore. I re-
member we had sex eight times in a row without using anything. He agreed [to try and get pregnant, and it worked the first time]. I got pregnant to get out of my house, to get away from my father, to get away from my mother. I couldn’t *stand* living there any more.” Young women like Roxanne hope that motherhood will somehow free them from the trauma of difficult personal situations, though they’re not always sure exactly how the rescue will be accomplished.

But children are no mere escape from strained familial relationships. Young women also hunger for the love and intimacy they can provide. Aliya, a twenty-seven-year-old African American mother, who got pregnant at seventeen with her one child, passionately exclaims, “Some people may say it was for the wrong reasons, but it was like too much around me going on. . . . I guess that was my way out of all these situations. [But] I wanted a child because it was *mine*. It was [for] love.” For those like Aliya, pregnancy offers the promise of relational intimacy at a time few other emotional resources are available.

Trust among residents of poor communities is astonishingly low—so low that most mothers we spoke with said they have no close friends, and many even distrust close kin.9 The social isolation that is the common experience of those who live in poverty is heightened for adolescents, whose relationships with parents are strained by the developmental need to forge an independent identity. The “relational poverty” that ensues can create a compelling desire to give and receive love.10 Who better to do so with, some figure, than a child they can call their own? Pamela, a white middle-aged mother of seven children, ranging in age from fourteen to twenty-eight, reflects, “I think [I got pregnant] mainly because I wanted to be loved. I went through my childhood without it. Somehow, I knew that . . . I would grow up and have kids, and it was something that was *mine*. Nobody could take it away from me. It was something that would *love* me. I would be able to love it unconditionally. There was no strings attached to it.” Pamela concludes, “I just knew, growing up, ‘Oh, you’re gonna have your kids. . . . The kids are still gonna love you. They’re *yours*.‘”

The desire to conceive can become so compelling that some young couples begin trying as soon as they feel it is minimally feasible to care for a child. Gianni, a seventeen-year-old African American mother of a one-year-old, says, “I was *happy* [when I found out] because I *wanted* a baby. [My baby’s father lived with my mom and me] and we had a good relationship. We *both* wanted a baby. Everything was cool, and I could go to school and everything because I had help [from my mom]. It was me and him [planning it]. He was eighteen and I was fourteen.” Deena, featured in chapter 4, now twenty, a white mother who conceived her child at seventeen in similar circumstances, explains, “I *wanted* to have a baby. It wasn’t like because everybody else had a baby. I really wanted to have a family. I wanted somebody to take care of. I wanted a baby.”

While older and wiser parents and kin may—and do—encourage the young to wait, to “live their lives” first, many young women come to see parenthood as the point at which they can really start living. When Pepper Ann’s mother learned she was planning to get pregnant at fifteen, she tried to put an end to her daughter’s scheme. Now forty-seven, this African American mother of two grown children and a twelve-year-old remembers vividly how her mother wanted her to get a diploma first and “live her life.” “But to me,” she explains, “that [baby] was life!”

Poor young women decide they’re going to try to conceive for other reasons as well. Some want to express gratitude to a boyfriend who has shown them kindness. Others want to seal a new and hopeful romance. Some feel obligated because their boyfriends have other children they’re barred from seeing because they’ve lost touch, the children have moved away, or the children’s mother refuses them contact. A few use pregnancy to steal a man from another woman or to trap a man they’re losing. The desire to bear children early—to “get it out of the way” before beginning a career—also compels some to make pregnancy plans. While most poor young girls don’t plan to become mothers at fourteen, they almost all agree that no reasonable woman would postpone childbearing into her thirties. Tatiana, introduced earlier, exclaims, “We definitely was like, ‘I’m ready. You ready?’ We went for it. It happened. I didn’t want to have
one at thirty! I wanted to get it out of the way!” And once the first child is born, many have another child or two quite quickly to get the early childhood years “over with,” for there is nearly universal agreement that all children ought to have a sibling or two to play with.

But attempts to get pregnant aren’t always motivated by the mother’s desire. Listen to the stories of four young mothers with newborns. Celeste, a white twenty-one-year-old, says she and her boyfriend James, who fences stolen goods for a living, had been together for just three months when she conceived. “He just kept saying, ‘I wanna have a baby, I wanna have a baby,’ just out of the blue. I kept saying, ‘Not yet, not yet.’ And it wound up happening.” Alexis, also white, conceived her child at sixteen with her boyfriend, age thirty-three. She relates, “He wanted to, but I told him I wasn’t ready. So it was like he got his way.” Champagne, an African American mother, says, “He was sixteen when I first met him. I had to be about eleven, twelve—something like that. He said that he wanted kids, and I said I wasn’t ready for no kids. I wasn’t even having sex! He waited for about two years until I got old enough to do what [he] wanted to do, but I still wasn’t ready for kids . . . He just had to wait. When I turned fifteen, we [conceived] the baby . . . but it wasn’t something that I wanted to do [that soon].” And fifteen-year-old Zeyora, a white mother, recalls asking her boyfriend Tom, age nineteen, “What do you want for your birthday?” And he was like, “For you to be pregnant.”

From the young woman’s point of view, any boyfriend who begs for a baby ought to be man enough to promise support too. An exasperated Cherry, an African American who is sixteen and just about to give birth to her first child, says her boyfriend Joe didn’t initially seem to realize that being ready to have a baby means being ready to support it as well. “[Joe wanted to be a father. When I asked him why], he said ‘I [am just] ready to have a baby.’ He sees everybody with their baby and he’s thinking he’s the right age and stuff [even though he] still wasn’t out of school . . . I was like, ‘Well, I’m too young . . . ’ He said, ‘I’m ready to . . . start a family.’ . . . He’s like, ‘I wanted a baby by you.’ I’m still say-

ing that’s not a good enough reason. But then he [finally] clears it up and says that he’s ready to support us.”

Eighteen-year-old Lisette, introduced earlier, also worried about the ability of her boyfriend Shawn, age seventeen, to support a family, but was eventually worn down by his insistent pleas for a child. She explains, “That’s all he kept talking about is having a baby . . . I actually [got pregnant, even though I was only in ninth grade] on purpose . . . because he wanted a baby so bad.” Seventeen-year-old Natasha, an African American mother of a one-year-old child whose boyfriend Martin was still a junior in high school when he got her pregnant, had also tried and failed to negotiate for more time. “He was like, ‘Oh, well, I want you to have my baby.’ I’m like, ‘Well,’ you know, ‘its okay for you to want me to have your baby but we can’t have no baby right now because we both in school and we gotta graduate and we gotta do this and that.’ He was like, ‘All right,’ you know, ‘We gonna be together for that long anyway, so we can wait.’” In the end, however, she gave in to her boyfriend’s demands. “That was May,” she remembers. “By August I’m pregnant.”

“IN A WAY I DID, IN A WAY I DIDN’T.”

Though pregnancy by design is by no means rare, in neighborhoods like West Kensington it is more the exception than the rule.11 Nevertheless, most conceptions are hardly pure accidents. Typically, young women describe their pregnancies as “not exactly planned” yet “not exactly avoided” either—as only a few were using any form of contraception at all when their “unplanned” child was conceived.12 Nearly half (47 percent) of the mothers characterized their most recent birth as neither planned nor unplanned but somewhere in between (see appendix A). The whites were the most likely to characterize their births in this way (56 percent) and Puerto Ricans the least likely (34 percent), with African Americans falling in between (46 percent). Most of the rest—roughly four in ten—described the birth as “accidental,” and Puerto Ricans were
especially likely to do so. When probed, however, roughly half of the women with accidental pregnancies said they were not doing anything to prevent a pregnancy at the time. Yet most knew full well the facts of life and realized that unprotected sex would almost inevitably lead to conception. So why do nothing to avoid pregnancy?

One reasonable guess is a lack of access to contraception. But Planned Parenthood, area hospitals, and Philadelphia’s network of free clinics all offer family planning services, and these institutions are so well known in these neighborhoods that few have to look in the phone book to find the address. Furthermore, most say they used birth control—usually the pill, a condom, or both—at the beginning of the relationship with the baby’s father. But once there is an understanding that they’ve become an exclusive pair, he often abandons condoms because continued use would signal a lack of fidelity and trust. And the same young woman who initially took a birth control pill each day, wore the patch each week, or visited the clinic for the “depo” (Depo-Provera) shot every three months suddenly decides that these practices are not worth the trouble.

Sometimes women stop using birth control even when they are not sure a relationship has really reached “the next level.” They complain that the pill, patch, or shot makes them sick, lose their hair, or feel depressed or irritable, and they have not yet found a more palatable method. Still others simply say they tired of the required routine. Lori, a thirty-one-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a two preschoolers, remembers, “Their father used condoms. That was our way of birth control. And he did that for a whole year, so he was tired [of using them]. He was like ‘Come on, the baby’s already a year! Let’s try without. I’m tired of using these things! You probably won’t even come out pregnant that fast.’ So as soon as we tried without, I came out pregnant like that! Really quick.” Abby, a white twenty-five-year-old with a three-year-old daughter, tells us she “didn’t plan on . . . getting pregnant,” but then admits, “Well, [I] more or less did. I just stopped taking my birth control pills, [thinking] ‘If I get pregnant, I get pregnant.’ I got pregnant.” Irene, an African American mother in her early forties, with five children rang-

ing in age from thirteen to twenty-five, didn’t plan for any of her pregnancies in advance, but admits that her lackadaisical use of the pill practically guaranteed her five “accidents.” She shrugs, smiling, and says, “You forget to take one pill and then you miss three. . . . Hey, next thing you know, you are having another one!”

One way or another, most of these women drifted into the Russian roulette of unprotected sex. The lack of a clear plan does not mean there is no desire to get pregnant, yet those who admit—even to themselves—that they’re trying to have a baby invite public contempt and self-reproach, for they know that the choice to bear children while young and unmarried is, in many ways, absurd. At the same time, though, they wonder if their circumstances will ever be “right.” The potent mix of social shame, self-doubt, and compelling desire leads to accidents waiting to happen.

Some, like Abby, begin to take chances on purpose and leave the outcome to fate. But others are so deeply engaged in a high-risk lifestyle that they simply aren’t thinking about where their actions might lead. Depression and despondency spawned by difficult life situations sometimes stop them from caring whether they become pregnant or not. Monica, a twenty-nine-year-old white mother of two, ages five and nine, explains, “It wasn’t like I cared if I did or didn’t. It wasn’t like a matter of, ‘Oh my God, if I get pregnant, I’m dead.’ It was just—if I did, I did.”

Twenty-one-year-old Sam, a white mother of a four-year-old son, was living with her drug-addicted father and had just seen her best friend murdered in a drug-related incident when she became pregnant. Both she and her boyfriend were also using drugs at the time. On top of that, the Kensington neighborhood she lived in had become so crime-ridden that most owners of the row homes there had switched from aluminum to plastic screen doors so that drug addicts wouldn’t steal the metal and sell it for scrap. She says that with all the “negativity” pressing in upon her, neither she nor her partner cared whether they got pregnant. “I think he just didn’t care if I got pregnant or not. I was pretty much [thinking] the same thing. . . . If I was pregnant, I wanted to be pregnant, but if I wasn’t it
didn’t matter. It’s like I wasn’t planning to have a kid [but] I wasn’t doing nothing to stop it from happening neither. I was ready if I wound up getting pregnant.”

Conception without planning is most common among the young, yet even the very young—like Antonia Rodriguez—usually say they got pregnant only a year or two before they’d hoped. Sherry, a Puerto Rican mother who is twenty-four and has three children under the age of six, says her first baby—conceived at sixteen—came only about a year too soon. “As soon as I found out [about the pregnancy] I got happy, because I wanted a kid . . . I was trying to get pregnant, but not so fast as I did. I at least wanted [to wait] a year. We talked about it, and he was willing. We both agreed with [the idea of having] a kid.” Tasheika, a twenty-year-old African American mother of a kindergartener and two younger children, has a similar story. “I was fourteen. I wanted to get pregnant because his father treated me right . . . And I was like, ‘Well, be want a baby, I want a baby—we’re gonna have a baby!’ He was planned . . . Well, we planned it, but he didn’t come when we planned, [he came a little sooner].”

The vigilance and care that most birth control methods require are hard to maintain when women like Tasheika see so few costs to having a baby. These young women often reject the idea that children—or at least the first child—will damage their future prospects much. Most believe that becoming a mother only gets in the way if a girl lets it. Nikki, an eighteen-year-old African American mother who gave birth just weeks after graduating from high school, explains, “I was supposed to go to college, but [having a baby] don’t mean you don’t want to go to college. You can do this! Some girls just get lazy and their potential will get real low, or whatever. That’s why most of them, they just stay home and don’t do nothing.” Ebony, an eighteen-year-old African American mother, conceived her first child in her freshman year of college. She defends her choice to bring the pregnancy to term by telling us, “I wanted it. I wanted to keep it. I felt as though I was out of school—out of high school—and I thought I could manage. I had started having sex when I moved in with [the baby’s father, but we didn’t use protection]. He was saying, ‘You can

have a baby and still go to school.’ I thought, ‘Okay, I’m gonna have my baby . . . I’m still gonna be able to go to college . . . It’s gonna be fine.’”

At first it is puzzling how any young woman could maintain this belief while living in a neighborhood that seems to offer nothing but evidence to the contrary. But our mothers have a different point of view. While they often struggle to name one happily married couple, they can easily rattle off the names of dozens of women who, in their view, are “good” single mothers. And many of these local heroes have, in their view, succeeded against great odds. So though their neighborhoods and schools offer plenty of examples of young mothers who had to leave school and face extraordinarily hard times, they still provide an ample supply of counterexamples—young unmarried women who have succeeded in doing well by their children, ensuring that they’re clean, clothed, housed, fed, and loved. Armed with these role models, they insist that it doesn’t take a college education, a good job, a big house, matching furniture—or a marriage license—to be a good mother.

Thus, most are ambivalent about—though not opposed to—the idea of having a child when the conception occurs. When we ask Violet, a white sixteen-year-old mother of a five-month-old, if she’d planned to get pregnant, she answers, “No, not really. In a way I did, in a way I didn’t. I was confused. I wanted to be a mom and I did not want to be. It was back and forth. I don’t know, I just wanted a baby, I guess.” Seventeen-year-old Aleena, a white mother of a two-year-old boy, tells us, “As I got older, like around fourteen, [I went on the pill] so I couldn’t get pregnant, [but] I was confused. I wanted to have a baby, but just not at that time, you know. [But] I always loved kids . . . I would [go through a time where I would] try [to get pregnant]. But then . . . I would figure, ‘Well, how am I gonna raise this baby?’ . . . I didn’t know whether this week I wanted to try or next week I didn’t. [But] I was always thinking about it. Always.”

Once a young pair has been together for a while and feels the relationship has advanced to the next level of commitment, the conception of a child often seems like the natural next step. Even if children seem to just “happen,” most believe they were meant to be. Jasmine, a Puerto
Rican mother of two adult children and a four-year-old she conceived in her mid-thirties, tells us, “I never used anything [when] I got pregnant. God is in control. And [my kids] was meant to be. . . . I feel like, if it happens, it happens.” Forty-three-year-old Susan, a Puerto Rican mother of one adult child and a preschooler, says her most recent pregnancy was “a surprise” too. Yet, she counters, “It wasn’t like I could just plan things. Things happen, and so you just go ahead. Some things happen you just can’t plan!”

As a new romance deepens, young women who are “not exactly planning” to have children may nonetheless begin to look for signs of their partner’s willingness to “do the right thing” if they were to “wind up pregnant.” A boyfriend’s mere willingness to engage in unprotected sex is sometimes the only green light a young woman requires, though her judgment is sometimes in error. Marilyn, a twenty-four-year-old white mother of a preschooler and a kindergartner she is raising alone, made this mistake. Just before they conceived, he’d proposed marriage. She told him, “Yeah, sure, but let’s wait and see. I want a diamond ring, and let’s get a house. ’ He worked on [that] part and I just got pregnant. I was [open to getting pregnant]. I figured, ‘This is the man I’m going to marry.’ We were having sex for a long time, sometimes protected, sometimes [not]. I trusted him. I figured, ‘He’s not stupid. . . . When we’re having unprotected sex he must know that something can happen’.”

“IF I DIDN’T WANT TO GET PREGNANT, I SHOULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING TO PREVENT IT.”

Even though most pregnancies are not planned, happiness is the mother’s typical response to the news that she’s conceived, at least once she recovers from the initial shock. Madeline, a Puerto Rican eighteen-year-old with a four-month-old whose father deserted her and the child, told us, “To be honest, I was happy [when I found out]. Like at first, I was scared, I was all scared, I cried at the same time, but I was crying happy tears too. All I could think of was that I’m too young to have a baby, I didn’t finish school! But then I thought, ‘I got the father with me, [it will be okay].’” Lenise, a thirty-six-year-old African American mother of two, ages eleven and seventeen, says her second pregnancy “wasn’t planned, but I was just too happy. I was happy every day. I didn’t know I could be so happy!”

Children, whether planned or not, are nearly always viewed as a gift, not a liability—a source of both joy and fulfillment whenever they happen upon the scene. They bring a new sense of hope and a chance to start fresh. Thus, most women want the baby very much once the pregnancy occurs.

18 This is partially a reflection of neighborhood norms about how a young woman ought to respond to a pregnancy, as the few mothers who admit a less favorable reaction often express shame about it. While everyone knows that accidents happen—and these youth say that not everything, especially children, can or should be planned—the way in which a young woman reacts in the face of a pregnancy is viewed as a mark of her worth as a person. And as motherhood is the most important social role she believes she will play, a failure to respond positively to the challenge is a blot on her sense of self. Rasheeda, a nineteen-year-old African American mother of a one-year-old, tells us that when she learned she’d conceived a child unintentionally, and in the midst of very difficult personal circumstances, “I was happy. I’m proud of that.” But Denise, an eighteen-year-old white mother of two-year-old twins, guiltily admits, “I felt bad about myself in a way because, like, I didn’t really want them. I was like doing so good in school and [I felt] I [had to] throw everything away.”

When the pregnancy is confirmed, most take a fatalistic view that it is meant to be, just as Antonia Rodriguez did. They also believe that it is unjust to penalize an unborn child for its parents’ poor planning, so they nearly always conclude that the “responsible” reaction is to “deal with it” and have the baby rather than seek an abortion.

19 Michelle, a thirty-one-year-old African American mother of three, a seven-year-old and four-year-old twins, tells us, “I don’t believe in having abortions. . . . If I didn’t want it to happen, I would have protected myself better. It’s here. I have to
deal with it. So that’s what I did, I dealt with it. Because if I didn’t want to get pregnant, then I should have done something to prevent it.” Brenda, a twenty-six-year-old white mother of a seven-year-old, has just learned she is pregnant again by Derrick, the same man who fathered her first child. She demonstrates what she feels is her high moral standard by telling him, “We’re gonna get through this and do it the right way because I’m against abortion.” Amber, a twenty-three-year-old white mother of a four-year-old and a newfound, was abandoned by her boyfriend after she found she was pregnant with her second child. She too, however, believes she has made the self-sacrificial choice to “struggle” rather than go through with an abortion or “give the child away.” “Four months into the relationship I wound up pregnant. I was like, ‘Oh no, I don’t believe in abortion.’ I was talking about giving the baby away, but I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. I was like, ‘I’ll struggle, I don’t care, I’ll do it by myself.’”

As sociologist Kristin Luker shows, many middle-class women view abortion as a personal choice arising from a woman’s right to control her body and her life. Yet most mothers who live in the Philadelphia area’s bleak core typically share a radically different view. Though most concede there are circumstances desperate enough to warrant an abortion, most still view the termination of a pregnancy as a tragedy—perhaps unavoidable but still deeply regrettable. Virtually no woman we spoke with believed it was acceptable to have an abortion merely to advance an educational trajectory. Something else, they say, must be present to warrant that decision—the desertion of the child’s father, an utter lack of support from the young woman’s own mother, rape or incest, an uncontrollable drug or alcohol addiction, homelessness, or impossible financial straits.

The irony here is that a substantial number of the mothers we spoke to willingly admit that they themselves had abortions in the past—about a quarter of the total. In absolute terms, the poor have more abortions than the middle class, but that is because they also have more pregnancies. Affluent youth are far more likely to terminate any given pregnancy than those raised in poor, minority, or single-parent house- holds. Even among the most disadvantaged, it is those youth who are performing poorly in school who are least likely to respond to a pregnancy by seeking an abortion. The class contrast is even starker when we look at only those with “unplanned” births. Affluent teens faced with an unplanned pregnancy choose abortion about two-thirds of the time, while their poor counterparts do so only about half of the time. Still, a large number of youth from poor backgrounds do have abortions.

The lack of correspondence between belief and behavior presumably arises because poor youth raised in impoverished contexts are simply quite likely to find themselves in desperate straits. Most believe that abortion is “the easy way out.” To them, “doing the right thing” or “taking care of your responsibilities” means bringing the pregnancy to term. And adoption is, to almost all, simply out of the question—it is generally viewed as “giving away” your own “flesh and blood.”

In choosing to bring a pregnancy to term, a young woman can capitalize on an important and rare opportunity to demonstrate her capabilities to her kin and community. Her willingness and ability to react to an unplanned pregnancy by rising to the challenge of the most serious and consequential of all adult roles is clear evidence that she is no longer a “trifling” teenager. Nikki, introduced earlier, graduated from high school just weeks before the birth of her child. She says that anyone who is mature enough to “handle stuff” ought to be able to handle a child. “[The doctor] threw all these papers in my face real quick. [She was] like, ‘You have two options: you can terminate the pregnancy, or you can keep the baby.’ So I looked at her and I was like, ‘I’m keeping it.’ Even though I didn’t plan for it or whatever, I can handle stuff. . . . Just by the way I am, I can handle stuff.”

Twenty-eight-year-old Allison, a white, recovering drug addict with a nine-month-old child, explains that though her pregnancy wasn’t exactly planned she could find no reason not to take the pregnancy to term. “I’d say my first thought was to take the easy way out, and then, once I had thought it, I realized that was [not] what I wanted. The way I kept looking at it was that if I do this now and I never have a chance to be a mom again, I would never be able to live with myself, because I’d always
wanted to have children. . . . Like I’m twenty-eight, I have a good job where I could support her, and I felt like . . . there was really no good excuse not to have her.”

Brehanna, the sixteen-year-old African American mother of a child she conceived when she was fourteen, explains, “I had stopped taking birth control. . . . I didn’t really care [whether I got pregnant or not] . . . [But when I found out,] the first thing I thought about was school. [Then] I was like, ‘Oh my God, what am I gonna . . . tell my friends? Oh my God, what are people going think?’ Then it hit me that it shouldn’t matter what [other people] thought because it was me, I was pregnant. . . . It was my problem, I had to deal with it, and it shouldn’t have been anybody else’s business. . . . Even though it was a mistake, I didn’t want to take it out on the baby and be like, ‘Oh, I’m gonna get an abortion, he’s a mistake.’ That’s just not me, you know, that’s just not the way I go about things.”

“TO ME, THIS BABY WAS MY LIFE.”

Romance these days leads quite rapidly to sex among poor and middle-class teenagers alike. But for a disadvantaged woman, a sexual relationship often leads to conception, and the fact of the pregnancy defines the arc of her young adulthood. Unlike their wealthier sisters, who have the chance to go to college and embark on careers—attractive possibilities that provide strong motivation to put off having children—poor young women grab eagerly at the surest source of accomplishment within their reach: becoming a mother.

Poor kids dream of future glory just like their well-heeled peers in the suburbs. But while the offspring of the middle class envision the professional kudos and chic lifestyles that await them, the dreams poor men and women share with each other often center on children. The men seem at least as eager to dream as the women. Yet this does not mean that the pregnancies that so often follow result from clear planning. Few say their children are the result of either an overt plan or a contraceptive fail-

ure. Rather, the large majority are neither fully planned nor actively avoided. Most often, the young women are well versed in the use of birth control prior to conception. In fact, many practiced contraception in the early days of their relationships with their children’s fathers. However, when the relationship moves to a higher level of trust and commitment, they typically abandon these practices or begin to engage in them inconsistently.

Whether the pregnancy is planned, accidental, or somewhere in between, most are eager to have the child once the conception occurs. This is because they value children so highly, anticipate them so eagerly, and believe so strongly they can do a good job of mothering even when young and in difficult circumstances. A poor girl who gets pregnant just a year or so sooner than planned reacts far differently than a middle-class girl who gets pregnant a decade or two before she’d intended to. Most of those who grow up in the urban slums of metropolitan Philadelphia also believe strongly that those not actively avoiding pregnancy by using birth control have no business “getting rid of” an unwanted child or “giving it away” after birth. Even mothers who conceive despite careful contraception do not often escape moral condemnation for having abortions or putting their children up for adoption, as they ought to have known where sex can lead.

While abortion is sometimes accepted as necessary—when a young woman’s situation is deemed truly desperate—most do not view their own circumstances as dire enough to qualify. Mothers who choose abortion when they have the means to avoid it are viewed as immature at best and immoral at worst, unable or unwilling to face up to the consequences of their own actions. But beyond the confines of this moral landscape is the fundamental fact that, for these disadvantaged youth, a pregnancy offers young women who say their lives are “going nowhere fast” a chance to grasp at a better future. Choosing to end a pregnancy is thus like abandoning hope. Whereas outsiders generally view childbearing in such circumstances as irresponsible and self-destructive, within the social milieu of these down-and-out neighborhoods the norms work in reverse, and
the choice to have a child despite the obstacles that lie ahead is a compelling demonstration of a young woman’s maturity and high moral stature. Pregnancy offers her a unique chance to demonstrate these virtues to her family and friends and the community at large.

Middle-class beliefs about the right way to start a family are conditioned by a social context that provides huge economic rewards for those who are willing to wait to have children until a decade or more after attaining sexual maturity. For a white college-bound adolescent raised on Philadelphia’s affluent Main Line, each year of postponed childbearing will likely lead to higher lifetime earnings. In fact, if she can hold out until her mid-thirties, she’ll likely earn twice as much as if she’d had a child right out of college. Just imagine how her economic prospects would plummet if she brought a pregnancy to term at fifteen! From this privileged vantage point, a disadvantaged young woman’s willingness to bear a child well before she is of legal age is beyond comprehension.

Even in the most impoverished of communities, most youth understand that bearing children while young, poor, and unmarried is not the ideal way of doing things. Yet they also recognize that, given their already limited economic prospects, they have little to lose if they fail to time their births as precisely as the middle class does. And though most single mothers readily acknowledge that having a child before establishing a stable two-parent household or landing a well-paid job may not be the best way of doing things, their sense of when the right time might be often seems quite vague. In the meantime, they typically perceive little disadvantage to bearing a child while unmarried or still in their teens or early twenties. Thus, in the heat of romance and sex, many simply fail to take the steps that could prevent them from becoming pregnant.

The young people who live in these neighborhoods—whether they play by society’s rules or not—share the same dismal prospects for lifetime earnings. So, for Antonia Rodriguez and Emilio and others like them, having a child while still in their teens is hardly the end of the world. Granted, Antonia didn’t get to graduate from high school—to “march down that aisle, have all those memories”—but she plans to go back for her GED soon. And Emilio needs no high school diploma for his job as a mechanic in his uncle’s auto repair shop, nor does he need one to achieve his dream of owning and operating his own garage.

Of course, children aren’t free—Emilio had to take on two jobs to pay for a place for his young family to live, and buying diapers, formula, clothing, and the other things the baby needs takes a large share of the couple’s meager resources. But Antonia and Emilio have few regrets. They planned on having children in a “year or two” anyway. Like their neighborhood peers, each firmly believes that life without children is meaningless and concludes that it really doesn’t matter all that much whether they accrue these costs early on or later in the life course.

The centrality of children in this lower-class worldview of what is important and meaningful in life stands in striking contrast to their low priority in the view of more affluent teens and twenty-something youth, who may want children at some point in the future, but only after educational, career, and other life goals have been achieved. Putting motherhood first makes sense in a social context where the achievements that middle-class youth see as their birthright are little more than pipe dreams: Children offer a tangible source of meaning, while other avenues for gaining social esteem and personal satisfaction appear vague and tenuous.
"WHEN I GOT PREGNANT..."

MAHIKIYA AND MIKE

Mahkiya Washington, age twenty, her boyfriend Mike, and their seventeen-month-old daughter Ebony live with her sister in an apartment across the street from her mother's house. Though their building is not perfectly maintained—the door buzzers don't work, the screen door is broken and boarded over, and the apartment's drop ceiling is missing tiles in several places—it's clean. This young African American couple's North Philadelphia neighborhood, Strawberry Mansion, was once an opulent streetcar suburb on the leafy outskirts of the city. But that was a more than a century ago. Now the neighborhood is one of the city's poorest, and its only claim to fame is that John Coltrane's boyhood home sits on its western boundary. On Mahkiya's block, however, the unkempt physical environment masks a web of close social relationships: nearly all of the other residents here are members of Mahkiya's extensive kin network, and most, like Mahkiya, have lived in the neighborhood all their lives.

Mahkiya is the third of five children born to stable, married, working-class parents. Her father died when she was ten, and her mother supported the children through her work as a community organizer and the Social Security Survivors Insurance benefits the family received as a result of her father's death. Mahkiya and Mike were high school sweethearts and graduated together from Strawberry Mansion High School near the top of their class. During high school, Mahkiya says, her relationship with Mike was idyllic. "We went out, no arguments; wonderful, beautiful... it was no problems." After graduation, Mike enrolled in a college located in a small central Pennsylvania town. He could only stomach the "country living" for a few months, though, and decided to take a year off to work. Mahkiya enrolled in a historically black college an hour southwest of the city, majoring in accounting.

When Mahkiya was nineteen and living in the freshman dorm, the couple began to occasionally have sex without a condom during weekends back home. Mike expressed concern that these "slip-ups" might result in a pregnancy that would derail their college plans. Mahkiya told Mike not to worry, assuring him she'd seek an abortion if she got pregnant. But the positive result on her home pregnancy test near the middle of the school year created a crisis in her relationship with Mike. Almost immediately, she says, she felt a strong desire to bear the child. Her grandmother fed this desire, warning her granddaughter that she might "never have another [chance to] have a baby, so you enjoy this."

Whereas Antonia Rodriguez's boyfriend Emilio greeted the news of her pregnancy with a kind of stoic acceptance followed by joy and anticipation, Mike campaigned hard to avoid fatherhood. "He called me on the phone at school to say, 'Get an abortion... If you don't get an abortion, we aren't going to be together.' Then he would just call up and say I was cheating on him, it wasn't his baby... If I wasn't in my room, he'd say, 'You must have been with somebody else.' And I was like, 'I don't need this. I am trying to stay in school and still manage to be pregnant.' It just stressed me out."

But the news of the pregnancy soon reached Mike's mother, who initiated a campaign of her own to convince Mike it was immoral to "force someone to get rid of their baby." This tactic apparently worked. "So then he calls me back in the middle of the night, 'Mahkiya, I think we should keep the baby.'" Even after Mike's capitulation, though, "It was
like he hated me for [being pregnant]. I still cared for him and loved him, but every day . . . he'd [call] and say, 'It ain't my child. Don't put my name on the birth certificate.'"

Mike's occasional bouts of "wild" behavior, which became more frequent during the pregnancy, also caused tensions in his relationship with Mahkiya. Prior to pregnancy, she says she might have joined Mike in some of the fun. But the practical realities of pregnancy meant that her behaviors were suddenly constrained in a way that Mike's were not. Like so many others, Mahkiya spent the last trimester of her pregnancy on the couch at home, bored and lonely, while Mike was out partying, clubbing, and "ripping and running the streets."

Mahkiya's relationship with Mike was also strained by dramatic changes in the expectations she placed on him once pregnant. Mike financed his romance with Mahkiya with a weekend shift at McDonald's. Even this minimum-wage job provided ample money to purchase the right props for the romantic partner role. But when she got pregnant, this expectant young mother quickly did the mental math and realized Mike's meager earnings didn't add up to what it would take to buy the crib, the stroller, the diapers, clothing, and other things the baby was going to need. Worse still, the couple was nowhere close to having enough money to set up the independent household she believed a new family should have. Thus, though Mahkiya deemed Mike a "perfect" boyfriend prior to pregnancy, he became "nothing" when the pregnancy failed to prompt him to respond the way Emilio had—to "get off his butt" and land a "real job."

Mike and Mahkiya were one of the few couples we met who had been on their way to what might have been a bright economic future. Their local high school produced more dropouts than graduates, and despite the appallingly low test scores of its students, this young pair's high grades were sufficient to earn them admission to college. Though both wanted children together eventually, they had agreed that the first year of college was not the time to start. Mahkiya's strong desire to bring the pregnancy to term, in spite of the clear costs to her relationship with Mike and her educational career, surprised even her. But the most surprising part of the story Mahkiya tells is how the news so profoundly transformed Mike's behavior. She cannot fathom why the boyfriend who adored her could begin to treat her with such contempt.

"I'M PREGNANT."

The story of courtship and conception told in chapter 1 is only the first act of a dramatic tale ending in childbirth. For poor youth like Antonia Rodriguez, Emilio, Mahkiya, and Mike, the news of a pregnancy can dramatically transform the relational dynamic. Two young people who have only been "kicking it" for a short period of time—often less than a year—suddenly realize they've ignited a time bomb. Most young women respond as Mahkiya and Antonia did—they attempt to get serious about life for the sake of the baby. Some of the young men do likewise, though few can manage to launch a business and purchase a home in such short order as Emilio did. Many young men, however, react on some level as Mike does, attempting to deny the new reality.

Once the dream of shared children becomes real, young couples moving at lightning speed along the relational trajectory leading to parenthood quickly learn that the imagined child is very different from a rapidly developing fetus. An expectant mother's experience of pregnancy almost always radically changes her sense of herself—she is transformed in her own eyes from an irresponsible youth to the solemn custodian of the priceless next generation. Overnight, her behavior must alter dramatically "for the sake of the baby." Even if she does not have the internal drive to make this transformation, the physical evidence her own body provides soon activates a powerful set of social expectations. Suddenly, the penalty for indulging in a drink at the neighborhood bar or a night spent hanging out on the corner with friends is steep, for she must endure the piercing social censure contained in the disapproving glances and contemptuous whispers of acquaintances and strangers alike. For these neighbors and friends, any expectant mother with a shred of de-
cencency ought to be home taking care of herself, not “ripping and running
the streets.”

Young men are not subject to the physical changes that announce to
the world they’re about to become fathers. Strangers do not look askance
at them if they continue to party or hang with the boys on the corner.
They get no special attention because of their “condition,” nor are they
the guests of honor at the baby shower. Only their girlfriends and some-
times their kin chide them to grow up, get serious, and begin taking care
of their responsibilities. Their male peers, on the other hand, may well
be encouraging them to celebrate their freedom while they can.²

Pregnancy and birth test the mettle of the soon-to-be mother and fa-
ther. Some rise to the occasion; others do not. The advent of pregnancy
quickly divides the committed from the fickle, but over the course of nine
months, even men who show initial devotion may falter.³ Thus, few cou-
ouples emerge from this turbulent period unscathed. Yet the magic moment
of childbirth often has at least momentary power to heal these fractured
relationships. Optimism and hope may return, and couples may again
make promises to one another that they fervently hope they can keep.

“WELL, I GUESS IT’S THE POPE’S, RIGHT?”

Despite the dreams of shared children that young couples so often in-
dulge in before conception, men are as likely to respond with shock and
trepidation—or even outrage and denial—as with pleasure. Like
Makhya’s boyfriend Mike, some immediately attempt to deny the child
is theirs and accuse their mystified girlfriends of being “cheaters” or
“whores.” Others try to force the expectant mother to have an abortion,
threatening to break up with her and have nothing to do with the child
unless she complies. Still others simply abandon their pregnant girl-
friends when they hear the news.

These responses provoke both heartbreak and anger, and even some-
times a lust for revenge in the would-be mother. A twenty-seven-year-
old Puerto Rican mother of three named Millie, whose story continues

in chapter 6, tells how she got retribution when her boyfriend tried to
force her to get an abortion the third time they conceived, though its
sweetness was short-lived. “He was harassing me from the moment he
found out that I was pregnant. . . . ‘Take it out, take it out, take it out.’ I
was like, ‘All right, you give me the money and I’ll do it.’ So he got me
the $600 and I [was so angry I] went on a shopping spree! So he flipped!
And right there, he went to my house and actually beat me up that day.”
At the time this mother of a ten-, eight-, and seven-year-old had already
lived with her boyfriend for nearly a decade in a stable, marriage-like
relationship. She concludes her story in this way, “He wanted me to get an
abortion, [and said he would leave if I didn’t]. And I felt as though, ‘It’s
there, I don’t believe in abortion.’ So I was like, ‘If you wanna leave me,
go right ahead. . . . I’m not gonna kill something that’s mine.’”

The nineteen-year-old boyfriend of Aleena, a white seventeen-year-
old mother of a toddler, heard rumors from friends that she’d been seen
with another man right around the time their child was conceived, pro-
viding an easy excuse for him to deny paternity. “He went home and told
his mom and dad that I cheated on him and that he knew it wasn’t his
child . . . and ever since then, you know, they always denied the baby.
Then . . . they wanted to take me for the DNA test . . . He’s the only guy
I’ve been with in the last three years! I never cheated on him. I never even
hugged another guy when I was dating him . . . [They] believed all his
friends over me.” Though young women usually claim their boyfriends’
accusations are completely groundless, youth in these neighborhoods do
move quickly from one relationship to another, and the rapid onset of sex
means that there is sometimes legitimate reason for doubt. Brielle, a
thirty-two-year-old African American mother of four children under the
age of eleven, tells us, “Now my first pregnancy, I was shocked . . . We
only went together like six months, and I had . . . broken up with him
[because I had] met somebody else . . . I was wondering why my period
didn’t come on. [So] two months later I had to make this phone call,
‘Guess what? I’m pregnant.’ So of course I knew there was going to be
doubts about whether it was his.”
Abandonment is perhaps the most painful response to the news of a pregnancy from the mother's point of view. Madeline, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-month-old, told us, "He said he wanted the baby from me, but I guess that was just words to get me to bed. Because that's one thing I was really afraid of—getting pregnant at a young age. And he told me, 'If anything happens, don't worry.' That's why I was confused when he said he didn't want to have nothing to do with me. Because he talked about it. We didn't actually plan like, 'Oh, it's time to have a baby,' but we talked about what would happen if I would be pregnant. He was like, 'If you were ever to get pregnant, don't worry because I will be there for you. You won't have to take care of it by yourself. I will be there anytime you need anything.' After I found out how he felt [about the baby], I felt like killing myself."

Denial, threats, and abandonment sometimes even occur when the pregnancy is not accidental but planned. Denise, a white eighteen-year-old mother of two-year-old twins, told us that although she and her boyfriend "decided together" to have a child, he nevertheless "totally denied [my twins]. The first words that... came out of his mouth when I told him I was pregnant [were] 'It's not mine.' So I said, 'Alright. Well, I guess it's the pope's, right?" Denials and threats are sometimes backed with physical violence. In the most extreme cases, the violence seems to be aimed at the fetus itself. Twenty-seven-year-old Millie, the Puerto Rican mother of three we introduced above, says her children's father "hit me all over... hit me in the belly" when she refused his demands for an abortion after their third child was conceived. "He was like 'You don't wanna take it out, I'll take it out through your mouth.'"

Even when a young man does not immediately deny the child is his or demand that his girlfriend have an abortion, pregnancy often puts the romantic relationship into overdrive. The woman hopes the pregnancy will spur her boyfriend to become a responsible adult. She wants him to get serious about employment, stop hanging around his friends, and share in the pregnancy by attending doctor's visits. She also wants him to lavish a particular type of attention on her, helping to relieve her physi-
cal discomforts and cravings by rubbing her ankles or running to the 7-Eleven or the Wawa (a local convenience store) at midnight to buy the proverbial pickles and ice cream.

Most men just don't seem to understand these desires or are not prepared to fulfill their girlfriends' growing expectations. Joanne, a sixteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a nine-month-old, said of the fifteen-year-old father of her child, "Before I was pregnant, when we first went out... everybody's all lovey-dovey and everything. [Then] I got pregnant. That was the most miserable part of my life. You would think that... your boyfriend... would baby you and everything." Eighteen-year-old Elaine, an African American mother of an eight-month-old, says, "[Our relationship] changed when I was pregnant. I went through a lot of mood swings and stuff, and he wasn't there. He was there but he didn't support me, you know, comfort me and stuff. He just like, 'We having a baby,' and that is it. And I was like, 'Well, we got planning to do.' He ain't wanna sit down and talk and stuff."

In response to the new pressures she begins to place on him and the growing disappointment she begins to express, he may become resentful. For the soon-to-be father, spending time with the soon-to-be mother can mean little more than constantly having to face his failures. This was certainly the case with Mahkiya's boyfriend Mike who, despite his achievements in high school, was a college dropout without a full-time job when the child was born. Men who once fantasized about having a baby with their charming girlfriends sometimes aren't so sure they want to face the months and years ahead with the demanding woman who is about to become their baby's mother. For their part, women believe that the response to a pregnancy is the measure of a man, and hope the crisis will force their partners to move toward maturity.

Many men do not cope with the stress of a pregnancy well. After he learns that his girlfriend has conceived, some level of regret and doubt often creep in. What seemed like an enchanting possibility in private moments of courtship can become a terrifying responsibility in the harsh light of day. Even fathers-to-be who initially greet the news eagerly may
later begin to act in ways that reflect their trepidation. Boyfriends who at first dote on their pregnant girlfriends may suddenly start staying out late, drinking or “drugging,” or begin to “dog” them with other women. Amanda, a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a three-year-old son, says the relationship with her child’s father suffered during pregnancy because “I guess he was just too into drinking. His uncle used to go out [drinking] and come and pick him up, and they never came back. I used to just stay home [because] I was pregnant when that started happening.” As her pregnancy advanced, she explains, “he went out and he didn’t care if he came home or not.” Millie says her relationship with her children’s father was “beautiful” until their third child was conceived. “It was beautiful. . . . But when the third one came it . . . changed. I guess [he] was reacting [to the fact that] I had so many babies. He went out looking for other girls and started messing with girls in the street. That’s when our problems began.”

Kyra, a seventeen-year-old African American mother, whose child is now nearly two, relates a particularly painful story of infidelity during her last month of her pregnancy. “Yeah, he was there for me until I was like seven months [pregnant]. This girl moved in across the street. . . . I was like only fifteen, and the girl was like twenty-three, and he’s seventeen. She called me and was like, ‘Yeah, I’m his girlfriend and he be over here with me.’ A couple times I would catch him going across the street. . . . I got to calling over there and [me and her], we was talking and she was like, ‘We had sex’ and all this other stuff. At the time, I believed her, but then again I didn’t. [Then] every time I turned around he was going over there! He was over there with another girl—he was lying to me. He stressed me out during the last month of pregnancy. I never forgave him for that.” These behaviors are an unspoken rejection of the mother and child, at least in her eyes. His refusal to come home at night, the abandon with which he may begin to consume alcohol and drugs, and his sometimes brazen infidelities all seem to be an unacknowledged, though carefully choreographed, effort to drive her and the baby out of his life.
Other men may react in the opposite way and try to exercise an almost maniacal control over their baby's mother. As we show in chapters 3 and 4, the sexual mistrust that is so palpable in the relationships of many poor couples fuels both women's suspicions and men's possessiveness. For example, Dominique, featured in chapter 5, a thirty-four-year-old African American mother of three school-aged children, tells us, "When I [got] pregnant with my oldest daughter . . . that's when, all of a sudden, [he started to become abusive]. He was always really jealous and possessive . . . . One day we were coming from the supermarket, and he [thought I'd been looking at other men, so he] just started hitting me."

Pregnancy can sometimes bring a couple closer together, though, which is how most mothers believe things are supposed to work. This was true for Antonia and Emilio, and it has worked out that way for Kimberly, a twenty-seven-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two, ages six and three. Her relationship with her boyfriend was rocky from the start, as he was repeatedly jailed for petty crimes and parole violations; however, each pregnancy has solidified the relationship and has helped keep him out of further trouble. She tells us, "If anything, [my getting pregnant] made us get closer. With his first daughter, he calmed down a lot. We got closer. The second kid united us more." Deborah, an African American mother of two, ages eight and twelve, who is now twenty-six, says, "[Our relationship] became stronger because [of the pregnancy]. He cared more because he had to protect me and my baby. That is the way he felt. He was worried about us . . . that was his every thought."

Sarah Lee, a twenty-two-year-old African American mother of a seven-year-old and an infant, also claimed that pregnancy drew her boyfriend and her closer. "During the pregnancy we was just going out to the comedy shows, eating, and always being together. Sometimes I may get cranky in my moods and don't want to be bothered, but other than that we have a nice time together. I say he is a real sweet man." These happy outcomes are not uncommon, though many of these relationships still falter after childbirth. We'll pick up on the stories of couples in these more stable unions in chapter 4.
“ALL OF A SUDDEN, HE WANTS HIS NAME ON THE BIRTH CERTIFICATE!"

Though pregnancy brings the presence of the child closer to reality, nothing is more real than the birth itself. And though many fathers respond with denial and threats when dreams of shared children translate into an actual pregnancy, the advent of a child is a compelling reality that few can respond to with indifference. Young women often believe men’s claims that they value children and desperately want to be part of their lives. Once a man knows he can no longer do anything to prevent the birth, the child becomes something of great potential value for him, for in these communities, young men’s lives are at least as aimless and relationally impoverished as those of young women. A child is one of the few things a young man can say he has created and one of the few ways he can make an early mark on the world. And men believe a child’s love is easier to win and hold than its mother’s. While mothers say they find it hard to deny their connection to a man they’ve had a child by, fathers believe it is even more difficult for children to deny the bond with the man who gave them life. But the rewards of having a child come with risks as well. Unmarried fathers who “step off” of their responsibility to their children—as they often do—are still the subject of contempt in these communities.

For these reasons, despite the heartbreaking behavior that some men subject their baby’s mothers to during pregnancy, many reluctant fathers seek and find redemption in the magic moment of childbirth. Listen to how Millie describes her relationship with her child’s father during her most recent pregnancy: “He left me [when I wouldn’t have the abortion] he wanted. He said he fell out of love. He couldn’t deal with it, and he left. And he was with a couple of girls out there. After the whole pregnancy by myself, he came back after the baby was born. He wanted to be with me again.”

Aleena, whose boyfriend denied responsibility for the pregnancy, tells how he changed his attitude when the child was born. “All of a sudden, he believes that my son is his. My son looks just like his father, the olive skin, and everything, the dark eyes, all of it, same birthmark and everything. There is no way he can deny that baby.” Children, once born, can exert a strong pull on a father’s emotions. Yet not all attempt to reconnect with the mother at the magic moment of the birth. A man who fails to show up at the hospital to witness the birth or at least visit the child in the maternity ward shows that he is unwilling to accept responsibility. Of her oldest two children’s fathers, Irene, a forty-four-year-old African American mother of five (three adults and two teens), tells us derisively, “They didn’t even came to the hospital, let alone try to hang in there, try to buy Pampers.”

Surveys show that in seven of ten cases unmarried fathers do come to the hospital and may even be there for the delivery itself. Often the euphoria of the birth temporarily calms the tumultuousness of the previous nine months. Lee, a white twenty-four-year-old mother of four (all under the age of five), said she had trouble with her children’s father before their first child was born. Things got even worse after she conceived again, just months later. Yet here is her description of his emotional reaction to the birth of their second daughter and her twin, a son: “He was there. He watched everything. It was funny. When [my daughter] first came out—you know how their head is—he was really upset, I mean ready to cry. ‘My baby’s a cone head!’ He was really upset. He didn’t know [it was normal]. I really knew then that he really cared about this baby. I knew he loved her. He was just really excited [the twins] were there.”

Men are typically delighted by a new baby and often vow to mend their ways. Because new mothers almost universally believe that a child is better off with both a mother and a father, they often desperately want to believe this promise to change. Shawndel, a twenty-five-year-old African American mother of two, ages five and three, explains her decision to reunite with an abusive boyfriend after the birth: “I want my kids to have a father even if he ain’t a good father… I don’t want them to grow up without a dad like I did.” Forty-year-old Carol, a white mother
with three children, ages twenty-one, nineteen, and seven, also reunited with her youngest child’s father for a time, though during pregnancy he denied paternity and then deserted her. He “showed up the day I came home from the hospital. I have no idea [how he found out she’d been born.] He was just there. He always showed up at the most important moment. . . . He wanted to hold her. He seen how she looked [like him], and his eyes just started beaming. Oh, you could tell by looking at him [he knew] whose baby she was!”

Some women, though, greet these hospital-bed conversions with skepticism. Twenty-five-year-old Cheyenne, a white mother of two school-aged children, says she was too jaded by the time her first child was born to be much impressed by the father’s visit. “I wasn’t together with him for the pregnancy at all. The pregnancy was by myself. . . . After she was born . . . he came up to the hospital, brought a big teddy bear or whatever. . . . [He told me,] ‘I love you. She’s so beautiful. Yadda, yadda, yadda.’ You know, bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, lies, lies, lies.”

Kensington resident Denise says her boyfriend cheated on her during pregnancy, gave her gonorrhea, then denied paternity and kicked her out of their apartment—all within the first two months of the pregnancy. She was forced to move in with her aunt and her three children, in a tiny row home that was also housing a cousin and two other friends. After the birth, he wanted to reunite, but she refused. “He called me after I had the babies, and it really blew me [away] because I hadn’t heard from him in like seven months. And then he was like, ‘Congratulations!’ and, ‘I want to come see them.’ And I was like, ‘No. What do you want to do with them after you denied them? You said they’re not yours and you just kicked me to the curb.’ That’s the last time . . . I heard from him.”

“WHY SHOULD I GIVE HIM THAT TITLE?”

One of the most reliable barometers of the state of the couple’s relationship just after a child’s birth is how the mother decides to name the baby. Lola, a twenty-four-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a two-year-old daughter, tells us, “I know one of my friends decided not to give the father’s name to the child . . . because he said, ‘It’s not my baby.’ But in the hospital, during labor, he showed up, and then she gave her his last name. At one point, I wanted to take Alice’s [last] name off because I figured I’m the one—I supported her for a year before he decided to help me. I was like, ‘If I’m the one supporting her, if I’m the one playing the role of the parents, then she should have my name. . . . Why have a name [of a father] that’s not there for her?’ At the time, I wasn’t getting no child support, no visits for her. I was like . . . ‘Why should I give [him] that title?’”

Danielle, a white mother in her mid-twenties with two children (ages five and nine), also punished her second baby’s father, who had deserted her during the pregnancy, by denying him the privilege of giving the baby his last name. “After I had her, I called his work . . . to let him know that he had a baby girl. So early Monday morning my phone rang, and it was him. He was like, ‘Can I come and see her? What is her name?’ He wanted to know why I didn’t give her his last name, and I said, ‘Well, you wasn’t around. You’re lucky you are on the birth certificate!’”

Men clearly read the failure of the mother to give the child their name as a signal that they have failed her during pregnancy. Sometimes, however, the meaning goes deeper. One nineteen-year-old African American mother named Tyhera, with a three-year-old daughter, tells of her boyfriend’s heartbreak and shame when his first baby’s mother gave the child her own last name, thus signaling that she would give him no role in the child’s life. “The first one, he didn’t even get a chance to take care of her. The girl had another boyfriend, so the boyfriend took on that responsibility for the child. The little girl has the mom’s last name . . . She didn’t even name her after the real father. She didn’t give her his last name.”

Mahkiya Washington refused to give Ebony Mike’s last name because he denied the child was his throughout much of the pregnancy. After she was born, Mike’s rejections turned to enthusiasm. “He was happy, and it was [his] child then, and he said, ‘Put my name on the birth certificate!’”
But his new attitude was too little, too late. "I was like 'No, her last name is mine!'" Mahkiya knows well that her refusal to give her child Mike's last name is a public slap in the face.

This isn't to say that fathers can't sometimes still redeem themselves. Mahkiya and Mike broke up during the pregnancy but reunited a year after Ebony was born, when he finally landed a full-time job. "In the end, it turned out real good because he got a job, and I got a job, and we [got back together and] manage to take care of [our daughter] very well." This couple is not thinking of marriage yet, but they share an apartment with her sister while saving for the security deposit that would allow them to live on their own.9

Other mothers also tell of boyfriends who "came around," at least temporarily, after their child's birth. Chanel, a white thirty-three-year-old mother of three, ages fifteen, nine, and three, has recently gotten back together with her youngest child's father after a pregnancy marred by severe violence. When her daughter turned seven months old, "He started changing... he started coming around. Now you can't take them two apart. Her dad's her favorite." She has forgiven her child's father, who no longer beats her. Of the beating during her pregnancy she now says, "It's a man thing. They're scared [of the responsibility]."

"THEY WERE DISAPPOINTED, BUT EXCITED TOO."

When young women learn they are pregnant for the first time, they are typically terrified of their own parents' response. Many fear that their own mother or father will throw them out of the house or try to force them to abort the child, and this does occasionally happen. Most of these parents have campaigned hard for years to get their children to stay in school and avoid early pregnancy, and some are enraged when their children ignore these dictates. Parents who have been down that road themselves are often desperate to keep their children from doing the same. We deal with this theme among our own mothers in chapter 5.

Victoria, a white sixteen-year-old mother of a one-year-old child whose own mother had her while still in her teens, said her first thought when she found out she was pregnant was "my mom—how my mom was gonna react. That's the only thing that went through my head.... She said if I ever got pregnant she would make me get an abortion. Before I told her, I called hot lines and stuff to see if she could make me have an abortion. They told me that she could not because I had to sign the paper myself. [Finally, my [older] sister... told [my mother that] if she makes me have an abortion, she's gonna take me and she's gonna leave, and she's never gonna talk to her again." Elaine told us, "When I first found out I was pregnant... I was scared to tell my mom. ... I thought she was gonna put me out... I wasn't afraid of having a baby, I was just afraid of her."

Everyone, including the poor, acknowledges that having children while young and not yet finished with schooling is not the best way to do things. This is why the kin of these poor youth usually react to the news with disappointment or, more rarely, anger.10 Even in poor communities where nonmarital childbearing is the statistical norm, most still view early pregnancy as something of a tragedy, and girls in this situation may face censure from teachers, preachers, neighbors, and kin. But a pregnancy also often galvanizes those same adults to help and support her—if not for her sake, then for the unborn child's.

It is not the news of the pregnancy itself that provokes the greatest regret, but the realization that one's child will not be the rare exception to the neighborhood rule—the one who avoids early pregnancy, finishes high school, completes college, gets married, moves to the suburbs, and has children—in that order. Virtually every prospective grandmother would like to be the mother of that neighborhood superstar, and a pregnancy that comes first, rather than last, on that list ends the dream. But a pregnancy that occurs "out of order" offers another, alternative route to respectability—albeit a slightly tarnished one. For if the prospective mother can somehow manage to "struggle and strive," she may still achieve some of those goals. And the harder the struggle, the higher the social reward the community bestows.
While mothers’ own mothers may mourn what might have been, they know the odds that their child would jump the class divide were never good, baby or no baby. Thus, the sense of loss an early pregnancy brings is, in many cases, purely hypothetical. Mahkiya’s story offers a powerful example of these tensions in a would-be grandmother or great-grandmother’s response. Her kin may have hoped the young honor student from Strawberry Mansion High would succeed in her bid for a middleclass life, and they do mourn the loss of this dream. Yet they recover rapidly from their disappointment. When Mahkiya finds herself pregnant, they staunchly support her decision to have the baby. In fact, her grandmother advises her not to end the pregnancy, cautioning that Mahkiya—at eighteen years of age—may never have another chance.

Denise recounts a similar story. Unlike Mahkiya, she chose to end her first pregnancy, conceived at the age of fifteen, in the wake of a boyfriend’s desertion. She tells us her kin are still scandalized by that decision. When, at sixteen, Denise informs her mother, aunt, and grandmother that she is pregnant once again, they successfully pressure her to “go through with it.” Denise then investigates another way out of her situation—adoption—but they firmly reject this option as well, characterizing it as “giving the baby away” and assuring her that they, her family, will help get her through this.

The African American grandmother has always played a powerful social and symbolic role in the lives of her grandchildren. But in the impoverished white and Latino neighborhoods we studied, where help from a child’s own father is often in short supply, the mother’s own mother is often an integral part of the parenting team as well. Poor single mothers across the racial and ethnic spectrum rely on their own mothers and grandmothers for much more than free babysitting or child-rearing advice. Mothers’ own mothers will sometimes put up the money for the crib and the stroller, especially when a child’s father cannot or will not offer support. But a mother’s parental or grandparental home also serves as a haven when relationships go bad, a job is lost, and the rent cannot be paid. Mahkiya moved back to her grandmother’s home when she finally evicted Mike from her life. Jen, the pregnant, seventeen-year-old white mother of a toddler (profiled in chapter 3), moves back in with her stepmother when the bottom falls out of her relationship with her baby’s father. And after Deena’s relationship with her first child’s father goes sour, this pregnant, white, twenty-one-year-old mother of a two-year-old (featured in chapter 4) finds herself back on her grandmother’s living-room couch with her baby and new boyfriend in tow.

Thus, the tiny row homes of these crowded urban neighborhoods often house a revolving cast of characters that spans three, sometimes four, generations. In fact, nearly half of our mothers live in such households (see appendix A). Naturally, relations between the generations are not free of conflict. Many mothers complain about the grandmothers’ tendency to meddle, the disagreements over childrearing strategies, and the sharp words over the men they choose to include in their lives. Thus, mothers tend to see their own mothers’ homes as a temporary refuge, a chance to regroup while they figure out a way to reestablish their own independent households.

A grandmother’s show of support should not be interpreted as a desire for her daughter to be pregnant. But just because her daughter’s life is not A-plus perfect doesn’t mean that she still cannot achieve a solid B-plus in life by coping successfully with the challenges life has laid at her feet. And given the tragedies that befall other neighborhood youth, how bad is a B-plus anyway? The pragmatic assessment of the probable losses and gains seeps into the accounts of the young, who so often insist that the pregnancy turned around their lives. Yet the persistent belief in the American dream and the sequence of steps “everyone knows” to follow in order to get there is reflected in a young mother’s hopes for her own offspring. This is why young mothers also insist that they are going to teach their children to follow a different path. Starting a family young may have saved her own life, but no mother wants her daughter to end up with so little to lose that motherhood becomes her salvation too.

A young man’s parents may react in much the same way as the young woman’s do, though for them there is less of an immediate impact. And
overall, the promise of practical support is far less sure. The mother of Antonio Rodriguez's boyfriend Emilio offered a great deal of assistance, harboring her son and his baby's mother until the couple could afford the row home they now occupy. Mike's mother lent Mahkiya support by convincing her son it was "immoral" to force Mahkiya into an abortion she didn't want.

But other would-be "mothers-in-law" join their son's campaign to pressure the young woman to have an abortion, or wholeheartedly back their son's efforts to deny paternity, sometimes even planting the initial doubt of her fidelity in his mind. Sons and their mothers are very much afraid of becoming saddled with the responsibility of children who are not their biological offspring. Some are constantly on guard for "trifling" girls who might take advantage of their sons in this way, despite the fact that many of them presumably faced similar doubts when they were younger.11 And while sometimes a young man's kin may take responsibility for supporting the girl he has impregnated even when the boy does not, this is the exception rather than the rule.

"TAKING CARE OF HIS RESPONSIBILITIES"

The reactions of women and men to the reality of pregnancy often stand in startling contrast to one another. Young women often admit to being overwhelmed by the responsibilities that lie ahead. Yet they express willingness, and even eagerness, to embrace the new challenges. Though some, like Antonia and Mahkiya, may regret that the timing or the circumstances are not ideal, most seem hopeful and even confident that mothering is something they can do and do well. Many of these young women believe that children, not jobs or relationships with men, are their life's work, and they face pregnancy with the strong determination to "do the right thing"—to have the child and embrace the role of mother—even if it means giving up other opportunities.

The responses of young men run the gamut from Emilio's eager acceptance of the father role to Mike's denials and his campaign to get the young mother to end the pregnancy against her will.12 Other men take the news well initially but later behave in destructive ways, cheating on or beating their pregnant girlfriends, or partying all night with friends. Some men manage to behave well throughout the pregnancy but fall apart as soon as the child appears. Zeyora, a white fifteen-year-old mother of a six-month-old, remembers that her nineteen-year-old boyfriend "was happy [about having the baby], buying baby things all the time when he had money. He wanted a boy. He was in the delivery room with me. [But] that's when things started changing. ... I think it's because of the baby, that he's not ready to be a father."

The pregnancy test, the ultrasound pictures, the swelling belly—all indications of the tsunami wave of changes ahead—cause a lot of anxiety and fear in prospective fathers who are often at first eager for the experience. Even in poor communities, expectant fathers are still supposed to provide, to "straighten up," and to deepen their commitment to the mother, even though they are not legally bound to her. Pregnancy forces these young men to confront their limited ability, and sometimes their lack of willingness, to pay the full price of parenthood.13 Emilio was both able and willing to do so, while Mike was neither, at least at first.

This is not simply because the young men in these communities are chronically irresponsible, though some of them certainly seem to be. Failure to take paternal responsibility has real consequences for these unmarried men, for if a father does not meet the mother's standards, the state steps in. The specter of child support is very real among young men in Philadelphia and Camden: Pennsylvania and New Jersey have two of the toughest child-support enforcement systems in the nation. Lola, a twenty-four-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a two-year-old daughter, whose child's father was twenty-three and stably employed at a legitimate job when she conceived, tells us, "First he thought it wasn't his. [Then] he was like, 'Now you are going to put me in child support, aren't you?' I was like, 'Well, we are not back together ... of course I'm going to put you on child support!' He was furious. ... [Then] he didn't wanna give the baby his last name. ... I later got the truth out of him. I said, 'You're
not really concerned about whose child this is. . . . It's about [the] $90 or
$40 [a week you'll have to pay]! They turn really rebellious, they really
do. They feel they don't have a life as long as they are supporting [the
children]."

Couples who remain together usually manage to avoid child support,
unless she claims welfare and is thus forced to participate so the state can
reimburse itself for her benefits. But if the couple breaks up, the child-
support system will appropriate a considerable portion of the father's in-
come. If he doesn't pay, the police will visit him on his job and harass him
in full view of his employer and coworkers. Then his driver's and other
professional licenses can be revoked, and he may be imprisoned for the
debt on a contempt of court charge or fined. And if he flees across the
state line to avoid paying support, he can be jailed on a felony charge.
More important, the mother will retain almost complete control over the
child, regardless of whether he pays child support or not. Meanwhile, she
can, on a whim, block his access to his child. Even worse, from his point
of view, she can introduce another man into the child's life, one who may
take the father's place.

Young men are aware that once they are out of the mother's life, they
may find themselves out of their children's lives as well, even though they
might be required to bear the burden of an eighteen-year financial com-
mitment. Though we did not interview fathers for this study, this sce-
nario surely runs through a young man's head when he learns of the preg-
nancy. Ironically then, while pregnancy may ignite his fear that
fatherhood means the end of his life as he has known it, his girlfriend sees
it as the point at which her life has just begun.

HOW DOES THE DREAM DIE?

JEN AND RICK

When we first interview Jen Burke, this white seventeen-year-old and
her year-and-a-half-old son are living with her stepmother and ten-year-
old sister in a rowhouse just inside of Port Richmond—which Jen con-
siders a big step up from the nearby Kensington neighborhood where she
grew up. She waits for us outside a social service agency where she at-
tends an alternative high school program for teen mothers. Jen is of av-
erage height and weight and has regular facial features. On this brisk fall
day she has pulled her ash-blonde hair into a ponytail and wears a kelly
green sweatshirt announcing her Irish ethnicity in bold white lettering.
Jen leads us down the agency's main corridor to a vacant classroom, a set-
ing that affords more privacy than does her stepmother's small home.
Though she is soft-spoken, her emotions are close to the surface as she
begins to tell her story.

Rick, the father of Jen's son Colin, was a friend of a friend who first
showed an interest in her when she turned fourteen. Jen was flattered by
the attentions of twenty-one-year-old Rick but was "scared to go out
with him at first because he was just one of those people who would just
be with girls, then he wouldn't be with them anymore." Jen "got with"
Rick in January, about six months after they'd first met. She thought Rick
HOW MOTHERHOOD CHANGED MY LIFE

MILLIE AND CARLOS

Millie Acevedo is a diminutive, twenty-seven-year-old Puerto Rican mother of three who “came up” on Eighth and Indiana, one of the roughest corners in the West Kensington section of Philadelphia. She greets us at the door of her rowhouse with a well-scrubbed look—in a crisp white T-shirt with a face free of makeup and her hair pulled neatly back in a bun. A block and a half away, a bulldozer grinds noisily at the remains of another abandoned neighborhood factory. But Millie’s block is relatively well-maintained and peaceful. The telephone poles up and down the street are plastered with advertisements for neighborhood events and give some indication that a community still exists here.

At fourteen, Millie believed she had found her future in Carlos, an older boy of nineteen whose best friend lived on her block. Carlos had a job and an apartment of his own. They had been together for a month when Millie moved in with him, and the couple began describing themselves as husband and wife, though they had no legally binding tie. Millie and Carlos were eager to have children but agreed to wait so that she could stay in school. Despite being on birth control and “taking my pills every day,” she became a mother before her sixteenth birthday. Though the conception was not planned, the prospect of becoming parents de-lighted them both. The pair shared old-fashioned, Puerto Rican family values, and she willingly dropped out of school to care for their child full time. A year later, they conceived a second son, this one planned, reasoning that as long as they had started a family, they might as well finish the job.

Millie and Carlos enjoyed a fairly stable relationship until she became pregnant a third time, a “total accident” in Millie’s words, three months after the second child was born. When she told Carlos about the pregnancy, he “totally flipped.” Though he’d been ecstatic about the first child and had been the one to push hard for a second, he immediately threatened to leave if she didn’t end the third pregnancy. Millie relates the story this way, “He couldn’t deal with [having another child], and he left. And he was with a couple of other girls out there. Then, after [I went through] the whole pregnancy by myself, he came back after the baby was born. He wanted to be with me again. . . . We tried to stay together for like a whole year after the baby was born.”

But during this year, which Millie recalls as the worst in her life, Carlos “had so many jobs it wasn’t even funny.” His frequent conflicts with supervisors led to violent confrontations at home. “And when it got to that point, I was like, ‘This is no good for my kids, this is no good for me, either he’s gonna hurt me, I’m gonna hurt him, one of us is gonna be dead, one of us is gonna be in jail, and what’s gonna happen with my kids then?’ That’s when I put an end to it,” she says. “I got a restraining order on him, I got him out of the house, and that was the end of it. I never took him back.” She told him, “‘That’s just it. I’m not taking abuse.’”

Millie is matter-of-fact when describing her failed relationship with Carlos, but visibly lights up when she talks about being a mother. As Millie imagines what life would be like had she not had children, she tells us her dream was to finish high school and enroll in college. Yet, like so many other mothers we met, Millie believes that her children have proved far more of a help than a hindrance. “My kids, they’ve matured me a lot. If I hadn’t had them and had gone to college, I probably would have gotten introduced to the wrong crowd, and would have gotten lost
because of the drugs and stuff.” She believes having children was provid-ence’s way of saving her from this fate. “Maybe I needed my kids [to keep me safe]. They come first. I’ve always stayed off of drugs for them, and they helped me grow up. . . . I can’t picture myself without them.”

Millie’s story shares many themes with other stories we heard. She believes that having children is a normal part of life, though she feels she and Carlos got started a year or two too early. Millie and Carlos’s first and third pregnancies were both accidents, but poor women are often more favorably oriented toward having a child than not. Once pregnant, poor mothers pursue parenthood with few of the reservations that middle-class observers assume they must (and should) have about raising children when they are young, poor, and single.

Mothers raising children in the toughest sections of Philadelphia almost always hope and plan for their children’s fathers to be part of their children’s lives, just as Millie did. When a man and a woman cannot survive as a couple, though, it is an immense disappointment but not the end of the world. As Millie puts it, “[I’ve] got a good home for [my kids]. They have everything they need and I give them a lot of love and attention.” When we ask about Carlos’s ongoing role, she replies, “They don’t need anything from him—you know what I’m saying—so I don’t ask for nothing.”

MOTHERHOOD AS A TURNING POINT

In an America that is profoundly unequal, the poor and rich alike are supposed to wait to bear children until they can complete their schooling, find stable employment, and marry a man who has done the same. Yet poor women realize they may never have children if they hold to this standard. Middle-class taxpayers see the children born to a young, poor, and unmarried mother as barriers to her future achievement, short-circuiting her chances for what might have been a better life, while the mother herself sees children as the best of what life offers. Though some do express regret that an untimely birth robbed them of chances to im-
prove their lot in life, most do not. Instead, they credit their children for virtually all that they see as positive in their lives. Even those who say they might have achieved more if they hadn’t become parents when and how they did almost always believe the benefits of children far exceed the costs. As Celeste, a twenty-one-year-old white mother of a five-month-old, explains, “I’d have no direction [if I hadn’t had a child]. I could sit here and say, ‘Oh, I would have. . . . gone to a four-year college,’ [but] I probably wouldn’t have.” Like Celeste, many unmarried teens bear children that are conceived only after they’ve already experienced academic difficulties or dropped out of school.

Despite the ascent of feminism and the rapid entry of women into jobs formerly reserved for men, motherhood still offers a powerful source of meaning for American women. This is particularly true for low-income women living in the poorest sections of the Philadelphia area, who have little access to the academic degrees, high-status marriages, and rewarding professions that provide many middle- and upper-class women with gratifying social identities.

Poor youth are driven by a logic that is profoundly counterintuitive to their middle-class critics, who sometimes assume that poor women have children in a twisted competition with their peers to gain status, because they have an insufficient knowledge of—or access to—birth control, or so they can “milk” the welfare system. Yet our mothers almost never refer to these motivations. Rather, it is the perceived low costs of early childbearing and the high value that poor women place on children—and motherhood—that motivate their seemingly inexplicable inability to avoid pregnancy.

These poor young women are not unusually altruistic, though parenthood certainly requires self-sacrifice. What outsiders do not under-
stand is that early childbearing does not actually have much effect on a low-skilled young woman’s future prospects in the labor market. In fact, her life chances are so limited already that a child or two makes little difference, as we document in the next chapter. What is even less under-
stood, though, are the rewards that poor women garner from becoming
mothers. These women rely on their children to bring validation, purpose, companionship, and order to their often chaotic lives—things they find hard to come by in other ways. The absolute centrality of children in the lives of low-income mothers is the reason that so many poor women place motherhood before marriage, even in the face of harsh economic and personal circumstances. For women like Millie, marriage is a longed-for luxury; children are a necessity.

A REASON TO GET UP IN THE MORNING

Children provide motivation and purpose in a life stalled by uncertainty and failure. As Adlyn, a pregnant nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a three-year-old and an eight-month-old, exclaims, “It’s what gets [me] going. . . . It’s like a burst of energy.” Seventeen-year-old African American Kyra says her son, nearly two, gives her “something to look forward to. Like when I don’t even have enough energy to get out of bed in the morning. . . . I know I have to. When I turn over and look at him, it’s like I’m trying to give him a better life, so I gotta get up and I gotta do.”

Motherhood offers young women with limited options a valid role and a meaningful set of challenges. Zeyora, a white fifteen-year-old with a six-month-old, recalls, “I wanted a baby to take challenges into my own hands.” Allison, twenty-eight and white, was a heroin addict who joined a methadone program when she learned she was pregnant. She says her life was going nowhere before her daughter, now nine months old, was born. “There was nothing to live for other than the next day getting high. [My life had] no point, there was no joy. I had lost all my friends—my friends were totally disgusted with me—I was about to lose my job, [and] I ended up dropping out of another college. . . . Now I feel like, ‘I have a beautiful little girl!’ I’m excited when I get up in the morning!”

Amanda, a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a three-year-old, says the birth of her son ignited her ambition and drive. She recalls, “When I had him was when I started thinking, ‘Damn, you know, I have to change!’ When you have a kid, you really need—I think you should

have an education so that [your kids] can look forward. You can look forward to telling him, ‘Look, mommy works here.’ He can go to school and tell his friends, ‘Look my mom is this!’ not ‘Oh my mom works in a factory,’ or ‘We get food stamps every month.’” Destiny, an eighteen-year-old white mother of two girls, ages two and three, hopes her daughters “will grow up to be something and not depend on anybody. No man, no welfare, nothing.” She’s doing her part by “making [the] kids smart and taking care of them, making them feel good.” Thirty-year-old T.J., an African American mother of three, ages four, two, and four months, says that motherhood has completely reoriented her life. “I’m complete, and I’ve done what I am supposed to.” She adds, “I don’t see myself as being an individual anymore, really. Everything I do is mostly centered around my children, to make their lives better.”

Jen Burke remembers feeling as if she just wanted to disappear into the background before she had her son. “I think about [my life] before I became a mom, what my life was like back then. I [saw] these pictures of me, and I would hide in every picture.” But the birth of her son set a new goal for her to “look up to.” “Before, I didn’t have nothing to go home for. Now I have my son to take care of, I have him to go home for. I don’t have to go buy weed or drugs with my money, I could buy my son stuff with my money. I have something to look up to now.” Aliya, a twenty-seven-year-old African American with a nine-year-old boy, says this about being a mother to her son: “It is wonderful feeling because this is my child and he can come to me . . . his future is in my hands.” “Your children have to come first,” declares forty-year-old Carol, a white mother of two teens and a seven-year-old. “You gotta put your children before your [man], even though he was first in your life. They didn’t ask to be brought into this world, and it’s up to you to take care of them and you gotta see to their needs.”

Part of the reason that motherhood breeds such a strong sense of purpose is the high cost of failure. Mothers repeatedly offer horrific examples of neglectful and abusive mothers from well-publicized child abuse cases as haunting counterpoints to their own mothering. Jennifer, a
twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican mother of six children under age seven, told us, “At least I don’t throw my children in the trash or drown them in the bathtub.” Danielle, a twenty-seven-year-old white mother of two children in elementary school, distinguishes herself from mothers “who are killing their kids, or doing bad things to their kids, or hittin’ them or abusing them, you know.” Lena, a fifteen-year-old white mother of a thirteen-month-old, draws a damning portrait of the bad mothers she sometimes observes in her Kensington neighborhood, and in doing so marks a clear moral boundary between herself and these failures. “There are people who just leave their kids laying on the floor with roaches crawling all over the baby, screaming at their kids, shoving bottles in their mouth with no milk, bringing them around with no socks and shoes, leaving them all night so they can just go have fun and party.” “They don’t bathe their kids and leave ’em covered in dirt. My daughter is bathed every day.”

“MY SON GIVES ME ALL THE LOVE I NEED.”

Many Americans believe that through the poor don’t have much in the way of economic resources, they compensate by forming unusually rich social and emotional ties. But in the neighborhoods we studied, nothing could have been further from the truth. Indeed, many mothers tell us they cannot name one person they would consider a friend, and the turmoil of adolescence often breeds a sense of alienation from family as well. Thus, mothers often speak poignantly about the strong sense of relational poverty they felt in the period before childbearing and believe they have forged those missing attachments through procreation, a self-made community of care. Brielle, a thirty-two-year-old African American mother of four children between the ages of three and eleven, says that few outsiders understand how central this motivation is for single mothers like herself. “A lot of people . . . say [young girls have babies] for money from welfare. It’s not for that. . . . It’s not even to keep the guy. It’s just to have somebody . . . to take care of, or somebody to love or whatever.” Nineteen-year-old Keisha, an African American mother of a one-year-old, paints the following picture of her bleak social landscape: “I don’t have nobody that I can talk to. I don’t have no friends, only got my baby. I can’t even talk to my mom. I don’t have nobody but my child.” Sonia, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a three-year-old, says, “No, no I didn’t use no birth control, because I wanted a baby. I guess I needed something to fill up that hole.” Aliya offers the following before-and-after portraits of her life. “The way I was raised, [with] so much violence and confusion going on around me, I just wanted to love somebody. And . . . then [my child] just filled me up with a lot of stuff that was needed.”

For many, not even a relationship with a man can fill the relational void. “When I didn’t have kids,” remembers Yolanda, a twenty-six-year-old Puerto Rican mother of two, ages three and four, “me and [my son’s father] were together but something was missing. . . . It was like we needed something. And then there were babies, you know, to fill the void we were feeling.” We ask her, “Is that the most important thing?” She replies, “Kids, I think so. In my life, yes.” Beatrice, a twenty-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a three-month-old, simply states, “My son gives me all the love I need.”

Children cure relational blues like no other medicine their mothers have known. Jennifer says of her oldest, “What I like best about being a mother is that my son always keeps me company. I could be in a real bad mood and be real cranky, he’ll just look at me and start playing or laughing at me, and he’ll just crack me up.” Twenty-three-year-old Amber, a legally blind white mother of a four-year-old and a six-month-old, exclaims of her oldest, “I’ve never imagined that there was any kind of love like that out there, never imagined it! My son . . . knows I have bad eyes, and he always say, ‘Mommy, I’m your eyes. I’ll help you do it.’ It’s the love your children can give you. Because nobody in the world can give you the love your children can give you. There’s no way.” She concludes, “I don’t know what I would do without the kids. I don’t know where I would be right now if I didn’t have them.”
The relationship between a mother and her child offers a haven from the often harsh world of adult relationships, especially those with men. Jen Burke remembers how her son was there for her after a particularly ugly fight with her boyfriend Rick. “After a fight with my boyfriend, I was crying, I was mad. And my son is sixteen months, and he came in and he was hugging me with his little arms, so I got happy!” “That’s the one good thing about being a mother,” she finishes. “Your baby is always there for you.” Abby, a white twenty-five-year-old, says her three-year-old daughter offers her refuge from a painful relationship with a man. “I can only take so much. I don’t need a man who abuses or cheats all the time. I have a beautiful daughter now! Because I was on the verge of killing myself; I thought I was worth nothing. My daughter is the only thing that keeps me alive. If I didn’t have no kids, I wouldn’t be here. I know that for a fact because I’m not that strong.”

Children provide the one relationship poor women believe they can count on to last. Men may disappoint them. Friends may betray them. Even kin may withdraw from them. But they staunchly believe that little can destroy the bond between a mother and child. Champagne, a seventeen-year-old African American mother of an six-month-old, exclaims, “The best part [is] I got somebody that I can say that’s mine. I know he gonna be there with me and for me. I know that he got love for me, and I got love for him. We can do things together. We have that type of bond.”

In motherhood, young women who live in the city’s hardscrabble core can find a powerful source of validation, for they believe that child rearing is something they can be good at, a meaningful and valued identity they can successfully realize. Pepper Ann, a forty-seven-year-old African American mother of two grown children and a twelve-year-old, recalls how as a child she “always wanted a baby.” She says she thought “babies were the most precious thing on this earth,” and she “wouldn’t know what to do without [her daughter] . . . She is my little heart.”

The birth of a baby also tends to mobilize others on the child’s behalf. And while the baby takes center stage, the mother enjoys some of the limelight. Rosita, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a two-year-old, tells how becoming a mother made her feel “special.” “Well, when I first became a mom, I got more attention, like everybody was closer to me. After I had her, I was coming out of the room, the hallway was packed with all my friends and family, and everybody was there, and I just felt real special, and everybody used to come every day to see the baby. Then when I went home, they was always around me and the baby all the time.”

“BEING A MOM IS SOMETHING I KNEW I COULD DO.”

But simply having a baby is not enough to earn social rewards; rather, a young mother must demonstrate that she has risen to the challenge of her new role. By presenting a clean, healthy, well-behaved child to the world, a young woman whose life may seem otherwise insignificant can prove her worth. Aliya, mentioned earlier, says that neighbors and kin see her differently now that she has a child and is managing to raise it on her own. “I guess they respect me more. I am taking care of my son myself.”

There is no greater proof of a young woman’s merit than the spontaneous praise of her mothering from a stranger on the street. The well-dressed child transforms the shabbily dressed mother. A child swathed in layers of warm clothing, even in a spring thaw, is testimony that an aimless teen is now a caring, competent, and responsible adult. The almost obsessive concern she has with her newborn’s cleanliness, however, exposes the fragility of her new claim to respectability. According to Keisha, “It’s hard when you don’t have money to take care of your baby. People talk about you when—like if your child is dirty and stuff. So that’s why I try to keep my child clean and buy . . . for Cheressa before I buy for myself. I don’t have no clothes, she has everything.”

Young women whose lives revolve around their children know that others are judging their failure or success at motherhood by these outside appearances. Santana, a thirty-four-year-old white mother of an eighteen-month-old girl, says, “When I go out with her, I think [about]
the way she . . . will reflect on me. I feel that people look at her and then look at me . . . . Before, I went out alone, and I didn’t think people were observing me . . . . Now I feel like they do. Like if she starts crying on the bus, and they look at me. They’re thinking, ‘Can’t you make her quiet?’ And so how she is is about me.”

This is why, though most mothers try to deemphasize material possessions, many still occasionally bypass the K-Mart on Broad Street for the designer discount chain across the street where Hilfiger and Polo abound, or even the Gap down on South Street. Having at least one “name brand” outfit for the baby is important to a young mother’s quest for validation. “[It’s] because of the status thing—to show people that you can afford to take care of your family,” says Marilyn, a twenty-four-year-old white mother of two, ages four and five. Sonia, a twenty-three-year-old Puerto Rican mother with a child of three, confides, “Even though I was on welfare—I ain’t gonna lie—I always like my baby to wear name-brand things you know? So they could never say that they ever seen my son dirty, in bad clothes or shit, that I wasn’t taking care of him.”

A well-cared-for child is the tangible evidence of a young mother’s importance. She is the one raising the happy, healthy, carefully dressed child. She is the one who is teacher and guide. She is the one who is helping the child reach each developmental milestone: the first step, the first word, a dawning awareness of right and wrong. Her identity is secure as she basks in the glow of the child’s accomplishments. Marilyn speaks passionately about the importance of a mother in her child’s life. “When you have a baby, people don’t realize you’re raising not only the body, but the mind—the psychology, the mentality, the emotions, you’re raising all that. You’re actually teaching another person how to speak English, speak the language. I mean, to know that I brought this person into the world and they didn’t know anything, and now I’m teaching and they’re learning—that was a great feeling.”

Mothers take enormous satisfaction from their child’s accomplishments. Cheyenne, a twenty-five-year-old white mother of two, ages five and eight, starts out each school year by reserving a place on the wall of the front room for her eight-year-old daughter’s school artwork and awards. “I like the rewards [from being a mother], the stuff they make for me to have. I’m so proud. Well, yeah, this is gonna be this year’s wall [pointing to a blank space on the wall]. If I had the money, every one [of her pictures and awards] would be in a frame.” Carmelita, a nineteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-year-old boy and a seven-month-old girl, says, “I’m proud of myself, [I know my son is] extremely smart . . . . I’m proud of that because I made my son what he is.”

These mothers see themselves in their offspring—often so much so that children become a reconstituted, yet more positive, image of themselves. The family resemblance between the two makes the child’s accomplishments the mother’s own. Carol brags about how her seven-year-old daughter Tabitha, the youngest, “is my prodigy child.” Tabitha, she says, was “walking at nine months, talking at ten months. She’s smart,” Carol beams. “The kids fight over who gets to sit with her at school. I love it. First grade, and she was the most popular kid in the classroom! And she looks like me!” Kyra, talking about her one-year-old, says, “It’s like I got this little me to take care of because he looks just like me.”

Women near the bottom of the American class ladder hope their children will give them a vicarious second chance at the social mobility that has slipped out of their grasp. Even though a woman’s own prospects might be limited, a new baby’s life is a clean slate. As she “struggles and strives,” to give them a better life, she heals the regret of having “messed up” her own. “I have so many aspirations for my daughter,” proclaims Jerri, a thirty-five-year-old African American mother of two children just a year apart. She tells her older child, now eight, “Look for something that you want to be, but be good at it and be useful to somebody. A lot of times I’ve felt I was useless to people. I didn’t matter.”

“TO BE SOMETHING BETTER”

In these decaying, inner-city neighborhoods, motherhood is the primary vocation for young women, and those who strive to do it well are often
transformed by the process. Nineteen-year-old Shonta, an African American with one child who became a mother at only fourteen, says she knows motherhood “has its ups and downs, [but] I never felt my daughter held me back from anything. If anything she taught me how to be responsible and mature.” Nineteen-year-old Adlyn declares that if she were childless, “I would be on the street . . . because I used to be out on the streets getting high. And look at me now! I’m going to school, doing what I got to do. I’m telling everyone, watch me when I’m done!”

Middle-class observers often believe that the lives of poor youth could be salvaged if not for the birth of a child—but this is seldom the case. Our mothers’ stories show that young women raised in poor neighborhoods can suffer far worse fates than having to drop out of school to care for a baby. The poor women we came to know often describe their lives prior to motherhood as spinning out of control. They recall an existence blemished by more than mere economic insecurity. For most, the “ripping and runnin’” days before children were marked by depression, school failure, drug and alcohol use, and promiscuous sexual activity. Along with this self-made chaos were their sometimes troubled and abusive home lives and the danger, violence, and oppression of the neighborhood.

Over and over again, mothers tell us their children tamed or calmed their wild behavior, got them off the street, and helped put their lives back together. Children can banish depression, calm a violent temper, or serve as do-it-yourself rehab from alcohol and drugs. Children—and the minute-by-minute demands they make on their mothers’ time, energy, and emotions—bring order out of chaos. “I would still be wild and stuff, hanging in the streets, hanging on the corners and stuff,” testifies fifteen-year-old Jessica, a Puerto Rican mother of a two-year-old. “[But] I didn’t want to get in trouble and then DHS come and take her away from me. I used to be bad, go around break windows and stuff. Now I don’t do nothing. I be with her all day. I come to school, go home, be with her.” Cheyenne, introduced above, is a recovering drug addict who says, “With [my daughter], it was instant love. That kid was my whole world. She was such a happy baby and a good baby. It was easy giving her love.” Now, she says, “I like the stability [being a mom] gives me, it’s very routine.”

Fifteen-year-old Zeyora says her six-month-old was clearly a blessing from God. “You know, maybe God gave [a baby] to you so you could calm down, you know? God close you to have a baby so you could let yourself calm down, to stop being what you are, to be something better. I felt that God led me to be with [my child] to change, to get back to school, to calm down so I wouldn’t be hurt. That’s what I feel.” Madeline, an eighteen-year-old Puerto Rican mother of a four-month-old, shares a similar story. “Before I was pregnant with him, I was doing real bad in school. I’m a real smart person, but I was messing up in school . . . smoking marijuana, drinking beer . . . Sometimes I didn’t come home for four or five days, didn’t even see my mom or nothing. Then I got him, and my life just changed. God’s given me something—I didn’t really want him yet but He’s given me something. It’s for a reason.”

Denise, an eighteen-year-old white mother of twin two-year-olds, says the conception of her sons gave her enough self-respect to leave drugs and alcohol behind. “Before I got pregnant, I was like smoking a lot of weed. And like drinking and taking pills. And I realized it was getting me nowhere, because I was losing my friends, and I was like losing my self-esteem . . .” [Now] I try to stay focused on what I want in life and for my kids. . . . It was like hard for me to tell myself, ‘I can stop smoking weed,’ and, ‘I can stop taking pills,’ and, ‘I can stop drinking,’ and, ‘I can stop getting with all those guys and having sex with them to feel good.’ . . . I look at my kids, I keep them in my head, like they’re telling me, ‘Don’t smoke, Mommy,’ or ‘Don’t run away and have sex with him.’ That’s what I tell myself.”

Champagne even believes that her son has helped her heal from the sexual abuse she suffered at the hands of a cousin and from her painful experiences as a “dancer” in a tawdry North Philadelphia bar. “I tried to kill myself before. There’s a lot of stuff going on in my life. I hadn’t seen my father since I was ten . . . my cousin raped me, and it was hard because
my mom didn’t believe me.” With the birth of her son, this young woman has come “to see myself different . . . I feel different about myself. [Being a mother] makes me feel like a whole another person.” In fact, a recent decision to return to school was inspired by her son. “If I wasn’t gonna do it for me, it was for the sake of my child . . . . That’s why I stopped dancing. I stopped doing a whole lot of stuff I was doing because, like, I feel I’m a mother now. I got a child, and I can’t raise him around that stuff. I have to do better.”

Fifty-year-old Pamela remembers a terrible night she spent homeless on the Delaware riverfront with her children. This white mother of seven, the youngest now in middle school, had fled from their father, who had threatened to shoot her and her yet unborn baby earlier that day. “I told the kids we were going camping. There was a whole bunch of big boxes from refrigerators and washers and dryers . . . so we took them up over the other side where we were going to stay, and we built this campfire. . . . I had food stamps, so I got cookies and cakes, and we got hot dogs and beans. I put the kids in the boxes [but] the river was right there, and I spent the whole night chasing away these sewer rats so they wouldn’t get into the boxes with my babies. That night we stayed at Penn’s Landing I was going to commit suicide. [But then] I thought to myself, if I did, who was going to take care of my babies?”

WHAT MOTHERHOOD DOES FOR MOMS

Some readers may be deeply troubled by the idea that poor, unmarried women reap so many benefits from the children they bear. The idea of a woman viewing her offspring as a resource violates powerful social norms about how a mother should behave. Altruism, not need, ought to govern her relationship to her children. Yet, as we’ve shown, altruism is also common and strong among poor mothers who are raising children alone. In reality, the motivation to mother among women of all social classes is a mix of self-sacrifice and expected reward.

One of the many advantages of membership in the privileged classes is greater access to a range of satisfying social roles. All parents presumably derive some additional degree of validation, some greater sense of purpose, some new sense of connection, and at least some level of reorientation because of their children. Yet few middle-class women approach mothering with such a great sense of need, and few see their children as very nearly their sole source of fulfillment.

When we’ve told these mothers’ stories to audiences around the country, many of our listeners are surprised to learn that, for young women on the economic edge, having a child can bring order to a life with no point or purpose. One woman, a new mother herself, conceded that having a child had improved her life, but found our claim that children bring order to the lives of poor mothers difficult to swallow. Her once-regimented, childless, middle-class lifestyle was more out of control since the birth of her child than she had ever dreamed possible. “How out of control must their lives be?” she asked, unable to conceive of how a child could reduce rather than multiply a mother’s day-to-day level of chaos.

On another occasion, a listener told us she simply couldn’t accept our contention that poor women express so little regret over having had children when and how they did. She demanded to know more about the “ambivalence” women must feel toward their children and toward motherhood. “There has to be some tension or sense of regret!” she exclaimed. But as the question-and-answer period ended and the crowd dispersed, a pregnant woman who had not spoken up earlier turned to her companion and asked, “Why is it so hard for people here to believe that the women would want their children?”

After spending six years talking about these issues with poor unwed mothers, the worldviews they hold no longer seem strange to us. But we must admit that at first, we were as astonished by their viewpoints as many of our listeners have been. Looking back over our own experiences on the street corners and stoops, the coffee shops and fast-food restaurants, and the front rooms and kitchens of these mothers, we can now identify the one question we asked that proved most revealing: “What
would your life be like without children?” We assumed this question would prompt stories of regret over opportunities lost and ambitions foiled, and some did indeed say what we had expected to hear. But there were startlingly few “if only” tales of how “coming up pregnant” wrecked dreams of education, career, marriage, or material success. Instead, mothers repeatedly offered refrains like these: “I’d be dead or in jail,” “I’d be in the streets,” “I wouldn’t care about anything,” “My child saved me,” and “It’s only because of my children that I’m where I am today.” For all but a few, becoming a mother was a profound turning point that “saved” or “rescued” them from a life either leading nowhere or going very wrong. Rather than derailing their lives, they believed their children were what finally set them on the right track.⁷

Aside from a few notable exceptions, some of which we discuss in chapter 5, the mothers we met seemed, in our judgment, to be adequate parents. Our central point here is not that these mothers were exceptionally good, but that they use motherhood as a way to make meaning in a void. Their life stories are testimonials to motherhood’s transforming influence, leading them to abandon their “drinking and drugging,” to trade a wild life for one spent at home, to return to school, pursue employment, reconnect with family, and to find a new sense of hope and purpose.⁸ This does not mean we accept at face value that these mothers are right when they say they are better off having had their children when they did. Some could probably have benefited from waiting. What we are saying is that these mothers perceive these things to be true, and it is this perception, rather than reality, that guides their actions. Before we dismiss their claims about the redemptive value of children, however, we should contrast their lives to those of their male counterparts, who do not usually bear the primary responsibility for their children. By any measure, the behaviors of men who populate these neighborhoods are considerably worse than those of the women. We simply do not know what these mothers’ lives would be like without the responsibility for children, and the sense of identity, purpose, connection, or demand for order that it brings.

Yet motherhood’s influence may be fleeting for some. We’re not claiming that every poor, young woman will stop “using,” get her high school diploma, find a career, or never again have an abusive relationship with a man when she becomes a mother. What motherhood offers is the possibility—not the promise—of validation, purpose, connection, and order. More important, children allow mothers to transcend, at least psychologically and symbolically, the limitations of economic and social disadvantage. These women put motherhood before marriage not primarily out of welfare opportunism, a lack of discipline, or sheer resignation. Rather, the choice to mother in the context of personal difficulty is an affirmation of their strength, determination, and desire to offer care for another. In the end, establishing the primordial bonds of love and connection is the ultimate goal of their mothering.⁹