

'DOING THE RIGHT THING'

AN ACQUAINTANCE of many years recently confessed that there was something she wanted to confide to me but had been reluctant to before. Her unmarried 22-year-old daughter is pregnant.

"Oh, dear," I replied.

"I knew you'd react that way," she said, disappointed.



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What way? I should have asked how other people react. With joy? Congratulations? Do they regard the absence of a husband as a mere detail? I bet they do. After all, baby showers for unmarried mothers have become *de rigueur*. And

let's face it, if most people treated the arrival of an illegitimate baby as a scandal, there would not be so many of them.

My acquaintance is understandably torn by her daughter's situation. On the one hand, she is pleased at the prospect of having a grandchild and glad her daughter decided against abortion. "The baby is part of us," she explained. On the other hand, she has lain awake nights worrying. She wants the couple to marry and has suggested as much to both of them. "I guess I'm just old-fashioned," she said.

The young man, a 21-year-old college junior, has no interest in getting married. His own father left when he was 8 years old, so

he doesn't exactly have a clear role model for responsible fatherhood. His mother, who imagines a career as a doctor for her son, is also against the idea (though marriage and medicine are hardly incompatible). She thinks he's too young.

Excuse me, but it's one thing to say your son is too young when he has not fathered a child. Once he has done so, the equation changes — or should. The baby exists. Therefore, the young man now has only two choices: abandon his girlfriend and his unborn child or do the right thing and marry her.

This is becoming a very common American story. Despite all the talk about teen-age pregnancy, the real action in unwed childbearing for whites is among those over 18. The rates continue to increase unbelievably. Between 1980 and 1995, the rate of unwed childbearing for white women has more than doubled. For example, in 1980, 31 percent of 18-year-old white mothers were unmarried. In 1995, 67 percent were. Among 20- to 24-year-olds, the rate of illegitimate childbearing for whites was 25 per 1,000 in 1980 and 58 per 1,000 in 1995. (The rate for black women has not lately increased, but then, the numbers of illegitimate births among blacks now float in the 70 percent range, so there isn't too much room for increase.)

I do wonder what goes through the minds of young men in these circumstances. I had been told that both the father and mother jointly decided against abortion. That's nice. But what now? This baby is going to come into the world needy and dependent. She

(they know it's a girl) will wake up every two to three hours for the first several weeks or even months of her life. Her diaper will need changing eight or 10 times a day.

Is this entire burden to be borne by only one member of the couple, whose joint irresponsibility led to her conception? Is it to be borne, moreover, by the mother, who will very likely be depleted physically after enduring labor and childbirth?

And what of the child's later development? Children need fathers. Girls raised by mothers alone are much more likely to do drugs, have psychological difficulties, have trouble in school and (yes) get pregnant before marriage than girls who have a father at home.

"You can't force people to get married," a friend replied when I presented the facts of the case. "Consider how many voluntary marriages fail!"

"True," I responded, "but as a feminist, is it your position that the father has no obligation in these circumstances?"

"As a feminist," she said "my position is that she has a choice about what to do with the pregnancy."

Someday, perhaps, young American women will wise up and recognize that the combination of feminist hostility to female dependency of any kind and male irresponsibility has left pregnant women without any support. Abort your baby, or raise it yourself. No one will prevail upon young men to do the right thing. No one seems to know what it is anymore.