

# Pathways to Success

—Barbara Burton

—At Florence Crittenton, we believe that the birth of a baby offers a unique opportunity for change and growth in the life of a teen mother and her extended family.

**S**arah came from a very abusive (physically and emotionally) home life. She is the oldest of six children and often had to sleep on the couch in her parent's home because there were not enough beds for everyone. Her dad was a recovering alcoholic who became very violent when drunk. Sarah's mom was verbally and physically abusive; she kicked Sarah out of the house after a fight, leading to Sarah's panic-stricken search for a safe home. She was homeless and pregnant. She bounced around from one friend's house to another, even spending a few nights on a park bench. When she heard of the *Pathways to Success* program at Florence Crittenton, she got in her car and drove 10 hours, by herself, to Helena.

As a society, we are sadly familiar with teen homelessness, but the topic of homeless pregnant or parenting teens is not common in Montana. The actual number is difficult to calculate.

While many are literally sleeping in their cars, some are "couch surfing"—staying wherever they can find a spot for the night. According to the Cen-

***The Pathways to Success transitional living program at Florence Crittenton helps homeless pregnant and parenting girls ages 14 to 21 transition to independent permanent housing.***

ter for Law and Social Policy, teen parents are "undercounted, untracked, over sanctioned and underserved." Without accurate data, the funding available for services is minimal, leaving teens and agencies to figure out possible solutions.

Issues faced by homeless teen parents are even more complex than those faced by homeless persons in general. Teen parents are not simply younger versions of their older counterparts. They are still involved in their own mental, physical, and social development, but must mature quickly enough to parent a child.

A multi-disciplinary team approach including education, childcare and relationship-based programming provides the best solution to help teens face the monumental task of parenting. Completing high school and continuing their educations can

break the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Barriers to succeeding in school can include finding quality childcare, catching up on missed years of school and staying accountable for attendance. Childcare should include early intervention services, as children of teen parents are at greater risk for development delay.

Relationship-based programming supports positive change through therapy, counseling, and 24-hour care by addressing issues such as substance abuse, physical, emotional, sexual abuse and mental illness. Job and life skills are also of key importance for a successful transition into adulthood.

Ultimately, however, the bond between parent and child is the most important and least tangible component—and therefore the most overlooked. The first three years of a child's life are crucial in terms of development and a solid bond be-

tween the parent and child is essential. Through attachment-based therapy, teen parents can learn the vital role they play in the child's well being. At Florence Crittenton, our bonding curricu-

lum begins during pregnancy and follows through birth and parenting. By video-taping mother and child together, therapists are able to capture moments of parenting to explore with the teen.

As for Sarah, she worked through her program and had a healthy little girl. She finished school and now lives on her own. She calls back to Florence Crittenton regularly to share her gratitude with the staff.

Providing teen parents with support, counseling and resources can change their outcomes dramatically. With so much at stake, it only makes sense to invest in the future of two generations of our children.

—Barbara Burton is the Executive Director of Florence Crittenton. For more information, visit: [www.florencecrittenton.org/about/success.php](http://www.florencecrittenton.org/about/success.php).

*Florence Crittenton specializes in therapeutic residential services for pregnant and parenting young women, ages 12 to 21. Many girls served have experienced multiple personal challenges including substance abuse, depression, truancy, and runaway. Our treatment model is a relationship-based cognitive/behavioral approach with a particular emphasis on attachment and bonding. This enables healing to occur and creates healthy relationships.*

*In our experience, in order for a teen to form a strong attachment with her baby, she must experience a positive, trusting relationship with a caring adult. She must also address mental health and chemical dependency issues. In order for this to happen, every staff person at Florence Crittenton invests significant time and effort into forming healing relationships with each girl.*

*Partial funding comes from a grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development.*