

# Supporting Young Sexual Assault Victims- Teen Moms

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How many times have you seen a teen mom and asked, "How old is she?" meaning, "Who let her run loose?" The question is not concerned with age, but rather is questioning her moral character. "She's a naughty girl," is our gut instinct. But this article seeks to change that gut instinct along with the questions we ask.

We understand that most victims of sexual assault are young. Statistically they are between the ages of 12-17, and we feel horrible for these children. Few of us, however, connect the statistic to a pregnant teen. Yet, with young moms, sexual assault is often the case.

Let's talk Arizona law for a minute. What can it teach us? Sexual assault, generally defined, is sexual intercourse or oral sexual contact without the consent of the person. Here is where the law is designed to protect the young; Arizona law states that a person 14 years or under cannot give consent. Nor can a person 15, 16, or 17, when their partner is 2 or more years older. This means the younger the girl, the more likely her experience was sexual assault. Legally, a crime was committed against her, which brings us to a new question, "What does she need?"

Chances are the survivor of sexual assault feels dirty, blames herself, is depressed, may be suicidal, has lost her self-esteem, and may have difficulty with every day things. Some victims have been groomed for years to believe that sex is love and that their body belongs to men. Eventually, some girls seek love with acts of promiscuity.

What can you do to speed her recovery process? Support her by believing her. The majority of victims tell the truth. The Southern Arizona Center Against Sexual Assault has a 24-hour crisis line and can provide valuable assistance (800) 400-1001. Horizon Human Services facilitates a support group for teen moms, for the issues they face. Call (520) 723-9800 for more information.

Secondly, do not engage in victim blaming. Innocuous as they seem, words hurt. Comments like, "how old is she, she caused it, and she's showing off her baby," blame her for a situation where she may very well have been a victim, in the legal and moral sense.

Thirdly, use good boundaries when dealing with her. Many victims were "groomed" by persons who violated their emotional and physical limits. They were touched inappropriately, were exposed to things they were uncomfortable with, and often feared to say no. Help them to say what they want or need by respecting their emotional and physical boundaries. For example, "May I touch your baby?" is respectful. "Do you breast feed?" may be a question she answers, but she probably doesn't want to. Respecting her right to be treated with dignity and respect will help her to verbalize her boundaries assertively. Saying, "May I touch your baby?" provides opportunity for her to be assertive. Grabbing, without asking, provides an opportunity for her to respond passively.

Lastly, help the young mother to feel good about using community resources. "Here's where you can go for milk," will help lessen any shame she may have, while encouraging her to use more of the resources available. Using as many resources as possible will help her child's chances of growing up healthy. Working together we can help her heal, rather than adding to her shame and victimization. Our attitude of support can help her develop new ways of coping and relating. We can offer hope and healing. Being mindful, we can do our part to break the cycle of victimization.

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