

The baby bonders

Australia has the third highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the developed world. But the Bump program is helping them make informed choices about their future, writes **Beverly Hudec**

WHEN Claire Green first met Suzie*, she was immediately impressed by her maturity and determination.

At first, this unlikely couple seemed to have little in common but, over weekly coffees and chats in Manly the mum with three grown-up children and the Allambie teenager have established a bond.

As a mum, Mrs Green stepped in to provide a mentoring role during 19-year-old Suzie's pregnancy.

"Suzie is very mature for 19. I really struggled with my first baby when I was 25," Mrs Green said.

"I wasn't close to my mother and as I came here from France I had my children alone. It was very hard."

Mrs Green is very clear about her role as a mentor. "Mentoring is not counselling, I'm there to listen, not to judge and see things from another perspective. A little effort can make a difference."

Australia has the third highest rate of teenage pregnancy in the developed world, behind the United States and the United Kingdom.

According to the 2006 NSW Public Health Report on Mothers and Babies, there were 92,781 births in the state, with teenage mums accounting for 3471. When those statistics are localised, 228 teenage mums made up for the 14,139 births in northern Sydney and the Central Coast area.

Three weeks ago Suzie became a teenage mum and a statistic when she gave birth to a daughter at Mona Vale Hospital.

"I was always going to have my baby," Suzie said. "Abortion was not an issue – personal issues made that a fact. This is my fourth pregnancy. I've had problems in previous pregnancies. One baby was born and passed away, I've had an abortion and a miscarriage. I couldn't bear to lose this one."

Professor Julie Quinlivan, Dean, University of Notre Dame Medical School Sydney/Melbourne, stated in

her 2006 report, *Teenage Pregnancy*, major consequences of teenage pregnancy include social and economic disadvantage, disrupted schooling, an ongoing cycle of poverty, domestic violence, higher levels of medical complications and discrimination.

Suzie's own experience backs up those findings. She has gone through her pregnancy with little family support – she doesn't see her own mum – and none of her immediate family lives in Sydney. She has faced discrimination, isolation and taunts that she is only having it for the baby bonus.

"I've been in and out of jobs. I had no work at all while pregnant, no one will take someone on who is going to be there for a couple of months," she said.

It's also been hard to make and keep friends. "Everyone judges you all the time, but they don't know me."

"Everyone in my birthing class was at least 27 – I had nothing in common. I did meet another young mum five days before she had her baby."

But Suzie is not facing motherhood alone. She has a partner and support from his family.

"He works as a mobile detailer, he's very supportive and is going to stick around," she said.

She also has Mrs Green's motherly experience. Suzie said that her mentor had given her a much more positive outlook on life.

"Before I met Claire, I felt very isolated. For the first time I've had someone there for me."

Suzie and Claire Green met through an initiative of the North Sydney-based Young Love Foundation. Its Bump program provides mentoring and workshops for pregnant teenagers and young mums under 23.

"Young Love contributes to the health and well-being of teenagers in our community," director Vicki Condon said.

"We provide school and community-based mentoring and personal development workshops to teenagers with challenges such as substance abuse, mental health and sexual health issues."

Ms Condon said that the Bump program was set up to provide pre and post-natal support for young mums and teenagers.

"Studies show teenage mums benefit from sustained social and emotional support," she said.

"Mentoring from a positive role model provides a nurturing pathway during tough times."

As well as weekly catch-ups, Ms Condon said mums and teens attend monthly Monday workshops with their mentors. "We try to do something for the mums at the workshops to improve their self-esteem and well being. There's childcare and lunch and it's a chance for them to get to know other young mums," she said.

Workshops focus on specific topics including giving young mums a little time to enjoy sessions on anything from yoga to skin care, massage and image styling. This month's group meeting is on Monday and it will be the first time mums will catch up with Suzie and her new baby.

Although Australia has the third highest rate of teenage pregnancy in

the developed world, Ms Condon said that the overall percentage of births to teenage mums in NSW was 3.8 per cent in 2006 with a steady average of 3.9 per cent over the last few years.

Education remains the critical factor for teenagers, according to Ms Condon.

"We all know that education is the key to helping our teenagers make healthy choices about relationships

and that education needs to come from anyone to whom the young people will listen, whether it's parents, mentors, teachers, GPs or other young people," she said.

"They all need accurate answers so they can make informed choices about their future."

For more information on the Bump program phone 0419 633 881.

*Not Suzie's real name.



Mentoring mum Claire Green.

Picture: LISA ALLEN, PP316612.