

300 unwed moms rely on family benefits

By MARY LOUISE BIRKS
Times staff writer

Last week The Times told the story of a young, unmarried mother, with comments by a Mississauga Hospital social worker and a public nurse.

Part Two

Pregnancy among teenage girls under the age of 16 is on the increase, says Joan Powell of the Peel Children's Aid Society (CAS).

"I know of one CAS worker who had a caseload of 64 pregnant teens in Peel in June of this year and one-third of those girls were 16 years of age or younger," said Powell, who is a staff supervisor.

Her remarks were directed to an audience of social and community workers at a recent luncheon sponsored by the Social Planning Council of Peel.

Today, if a pregnant teenager decides against an abortion, she has only two alternatives — to keep her child or to put the baby up for adoption.

"The CAS is stuck with a child-snatching image, but our primary role is to help pregnant teens look at all the alternatives and to let them know what it would be like to keep the child," said Powell, an MSW with 15 years experience with the CAS in Peel.

"The key issue is how can this particular girl handle parenting her baby — and most 15-year-old girls are not equipped for this role."

The CAS can help a teenage mother place her child in a foster home until she can find a job and a place to live, or they can help her have the baby adopted.

"It's the girl's right to keep her baby," said Powell. "We might not like her decision and tell her we don't think it's a good idea, but we can't stop her unless it can be proven that the child needs protection under the provisions of the Child Welfare Act."

On the other hand, it's easier for a CAS worker to reassure a teenage mother that her baby will be adopted quickly. In Ontario and in Peel especially, couples wait between two and five years to adopt healthy newborn infants because the supply of babies is less than the current demand, she said.

With more teenage mothers choosing abortion or keeping their babies, and fewer using the maternity homes (because there's not the same social stigma there once was about being an unwed teenage mother), often a CAS worker's first contact with a girl is after her baby is born "or else we don't see them at all," said Powell.

"And the later you see them, the harder it is to build a good rapport and to gain their trust." She regrets that there's no further contact with the mother and child until a toddler is in need of CAS protection.

"We might be worried about what's going to happen down the road," she said, "but we can't act on what we think might happen."

The problems begin as soon as a teenage mother goes home, said Diane Summerhayes, a field worker with Family Benefits. (She estimates there are between 260 and 300 single teenage mothers in Peel out of a total of 2600 persons receiving family benefits.)

There are finances to be worked out and the baby's nurturing and nutrition take up most of a young mother's time, she said. "It's not as bad for those who have families to go home to, but gradually the novelty wears off and the teenage mother feels isolated."

"By the time the baby is six months old, with both mother and baby doing okay, it's time to plan for the future. If she opts to go back to school that means she needs a babysitter. Teenage mothers can apply for subsidized day care but that takes time and you can't buy food and pay rent on a mother's allowance and still have some left over to pay a sitter."

Because welfare and family benefits are only a "very limited income" teenage mothers usually must clothe the baby and themselves with funds from other agencies, said Summerhayes.

"Without more resources or agencies, there's not much hope for the future of these young mothers," said Summerhayes.



Constable Chris Bygness of the Peel Regional Police force shows block parent Lois Johnson where to place a block parent sign, while Mrs. Johnson's children, David, 2, Cara, 5, Dianne, 9, and Cathy, 11, listen.

Block Parents

A haven for kids

By MARY LOUISE BIRKS
Times staff writer

Three weeks ago block parent Lois Johnson of Mississauga Valley Boulevard opened her back door to a frightened 11-year-old girl who was bleeding profusely and bravely fighting back her tears.

"The children who brought her to my door told me what had happened — that a young boy had thrown a fair-sized stone that hit her in the face," said Johnson.

"I sat the youngster down in my kitchen and cleaned her up and tried to reach her mother but the line was busy. Another child ran to the girl's house to get her mother and together we went to the hospital because I could see stitches were needed to close the wound."

Although the young girl's mother was concerned her child would feel a backlash if the police were notified, she agreed the incident must be reported.

Then the police came and spoke to the children about what had happened, before speaking with the boy and his parents. As a result the young boy's mother promised to phone the little girl's parents to tell them how badly her son felt and that it would never happen again.

Children are taught in school that a

block parent sign in the window of a house means someone is home to answer the door if they need help (but not if they want to use the bathroom or just because they're thirsty.)

Block parents are volunteers in the community who provide an organized method of protecting children from stray animals, bullying, injury and would-be child molesters.

There can never be too many block parents, said Constable Chris Bygness of the Peel Regional Police traffic safety division and anyone over 16 can apply.

You don't have to be a parent and you don't have to alter your lifestyle, said Bygness. "You just place the block parent sign in the window when you're available to give help and remove the sign at all other times."

For more information call the school in your neighborhood for your block parent captain's name and phone number or call Constable Bygness at 453-3311.

October is Block Parent month in Mississauga and the program's organizers are conducting an awareness campaign in the local malls to educate the public about the role of block parents.

Business isn't booming

Monica Stringer thinks she is the only addiction counsellor in private practice in Mississauga. She provides counselling and support for abusers of alcohol and drugs and their families.

She has tried for nearly a year to establish a full-time practice here but business isn't booming. Since going back to school after 20 years and graduating with honors and a diploma in addiction counselling from George Brown College last December, she's sent over 300 letters to doctors, clergy and businesses in Mississauga advertising her service — and heard back from none of them.

Her only referrals have come from a few doctors on



Mary Louise Birks

staff at the Mississauga Hospital, where Stringer logged over 1,000 hours of field work between February 1977 and August 1978, counselling alcohol and drug abusing patients and their families, through the hospital's social work department.

"The businesses I've approached to see if they'd like a part-time addiction counsellor to work half-a-day, once a week, all had over 300 employees and I was told, 'It's not necessary because we don't have alcoholics on staff,'" said 41-year-old Stringer who lives on Stavebank Road.

"I'm almost ready to believe those who tell me there isn't a need for my services, even though the Addiction Research Foundation and the hospital assure me alcoholism is a chronic problem for many Mississauga residents."

"I know the Mississauga Hospital refers its patients with alcohol-related problems to me regularly but no-one has called," said the single mother of three. "But people are reluctant to seek my help unless they're desperate. My services aren't covered by OHIP and many people won't pay for social services, although my fees are reasonable because I want to reach the average person. I'm not getting to them and I don't know why."

An initial one hour assessment costs \$20, while individual, marital and family counselling is \$15 an hour and group counselling in a two-hour session is \$10. For information call Monica Stringer at 271-1051.

Stringer always suggests her clients who are alcoholics go to Alcoholics Anonymous and that they try Antabuse. She accepts that this method of treatment isn't right for everybody, that's why she feels private counselling is so important as well.

From January to September, 1979, she counselled about 25 clients, and about 20 of the 25 had alcohol-related problems. Over half of the 25 were probationers between the age of 16 and 20 and 90 per cent were men.

"Women alcoholics can hide in the closet a lot longer than men," she said. "A man is told by his doctor that his liver is shot or he's about to lose his job or his family threatens to leave him and he has to do something about it. I don't think there are more male alcoholics, there are just more identified."

Most alcoholics feel if they stop drinking the problem will be solved, said Stringer, but it's not that simple.

There are a lot of things an alcoholic never does without a drink, she said. It's essential that when they're dry they learn new skills to help them deal with such issues as anger, communication, boredom, loneliness, and depression.

Misspent leisure time is often a problem, said Stringer who estimates 90 per cent of all alcoholics don't know how to spend their leisure time without alcohol, and this is particularly true of young alcoholics.

There's a happy postscript to this story. One week after I spoke with Monica Stringer she phoned to tell me she'd been asked to teach two courses at George Brown and to co-ordinate field work assignments.

She's excited about her part-time job, but will continue to try and build up her private practice in Mississauga.

No supervised lunch for Sean and Michael

By JOHN STEWART
Times staff writer

Sean and Michael Keeping will be staying for lunch at Ray Underhill Public School as long as possible even though the school board says they do not have lunchroom privileges.

Robert Keeping, a Streetsville parent who appealed for an exemption to board policy, lost his battle last week.

Keeping moved eight-tenths of a mile earlier this year, and in so doing, he moved from the attendance area of Underhill to that of Meadowvale Public School.

While his children are entitled to busing to Meadowvale and lunchroom supervision there, Keeping says his 11 and 8-year-old sons want to

continue at Ray Underhill. They will walk to school, but it is too far for them to go home for lunch, Keeping says.

Under the board's flexible boundary attendance policy, anyone not attending their normal school loses both lunchroom and busing privileges.

In a 14-1 decision last week, the board turned down Keeping's request, saying that if transportation or lunchroom privileges became portable it "would create a considerable amount of chaos in the school system."

In a letter to Keeping rejecting his argument, board chairperson William Kent pointed out that a parent-sponsored lunch program is available at Underhill for \$1 per day.

Keeping says the parent-sponsored program, at \$1 per day, will cost him \$400 a year, which he says he can't afford.

The children remained for lunch all last week after the board made its decision. The board has paid for lunchroom supervision of the children until Keeping's appeal was heard. Keeping feels that his children can supervise their own lunch, as they do at home. If it comes to it, he says he'll drive the 10 miles from his job site to supervise the kids at school.

Two Brampton school trustees suggested to the board that under the Ontario Education Act, the school is open all day until the last class, and no students can be denied attendance for a portion of the day. Gary Heighington also

said that the Act forbids the charging of fees for attendance.

Director of education John Fraser countered that it is parents, not the board, which sets up and charges for the lunchroom supervision.

Keeping argued that the board should only allow portable lunchroom or busing privileges when the board is saving money. "I appealed to their common sense, their intelligence and basic economics," he says. "That's where I made my big mistake. I shouldn't have appealed to their common sense."

The board feels that if a precedent is set allowing transfer of privileges, then large numbers of parents will take advantage and administrative nightmares will follow.