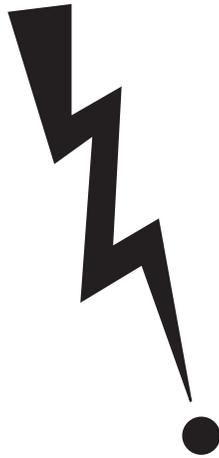


MY  
GIRLFRIEND'S  
PREGNANT!

A TEEN'S GUIDE TO  
BECOMING A DAD



CHLOE SHANTZ-HILKES

© 2015 Chloe Shantz-Hilkes (text)  
© 2015 Willow Dawson (cover art and interior illustrations)  
Designed by Sheryl Shapiro

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We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF) for our publishing activities.



Quotes included from *THE CURRENT – The Boy with the Past* – February 9, 2012  
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### Cataloging in Publication

Shantz-Hilkes, Chloe, author

My girlfriend's pregnant! / written by Chloe Shantz-Hilkes ;  
illustrated by Willow Dawson.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55451-742-8 (pbk.).—ISBN 978-1-55451-743-5 (bound).—

ISBN 978-1-55451-744-2 (html).—ISBN 978-1-55451-745-9 (pdf)

1. Teenage fathers—Psychology. 2. Teenage fathers—Life skills guides.  
3. Pregnancy—Psychological aspects. 4. Parenthood—Psychological aspects.  
I. Title

HQ756.7.S53 2015

306.874'2

C2015-900841-7

C2015-900842-5

Printed in Canada

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Also available in e-book format. Please visit [www.annickpress.com/ebooks.html](http://www.annickpress.com/ebooks.html)  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the support and contributions of many people. First and foremost, my heartfelt thanks go out to each and every young dad who chose to share his experience of fatherhood with me. In some cases, reminiscing about pregnancy, abortion, childbirth, adoption, and/or parenting meant revisiting painful memories and times of regret. I am forever grateful to all the participating dads for their openness with me and with readers. I have no doubt that your stories will help other stressed out young fathers make tough choices and feel less alone along the way!

I am also grateful to Dr. Gary Clapton, Marlon Merrano, Mike White, Cheryl Dobinson, and the wonderful team at Annick Press for their contributions. As well, my thanks go out to the countless case workers, counselors, and medical professionals who provided me with vital information and access to young dads.

Thank you to the Ontario Arts Council for Writer's Reserve Grant that enabled me to complete this project.

Finally, thanks always to my family and my partner Chris for their continual support.

# FOREWORD

I was in my last year of university when my girlfriend told me she was pregnant. My first thought was “No, not yet! I’m so close to finishing!” I had many examples of what to do and many opinions on how to do it, but I wasn’t in a place where I could use any of what I saw or heard.

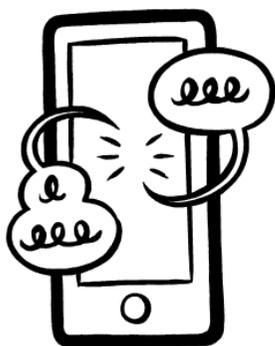
I was raised in a large family, the last of nine children. As an immigrant boy from Jamaica living in Toronto, I was surrounded by the good, the bad, and the ugly in life. My high school teachers probably figured I would be in jail by age 19; they certainly would not have seen me as father material. Some would say the chances were low that I would grow up to be a father of three amazing girls and have an excellent career. I’m glad to tell you they were wrong.

Have you ever felt very alone in a crowded room of family and friends? This is what being a father often felt like to me. I spent many years pretending I knew what I was doing, faking it until making it.

The great thing about life is that you are never prepared for it—it just happens. And as you will read throughout *My Girlfriend’s Pregnant!* becoming a father can be just like that—sometimes it just happens. I had to learn the hard way, just by being a father.

Much later in life I had a second child who was planned, and I thought that would be so much easier. But having a second child was also really hard. And my third child? Yes, learning to be a father to her was hard too.

What really made a difference for me was to create a small community of people and friends that would encourage,



assist, and challenge me to be a better person and thus a better father. It also helped that I worked with other young men and women to share their stories in order to help themselves and other young people.

You will read similar stories in this book, and you will feel the young fathers' anger and excitement and hear the solutions that worked for them. You're not alone in this journey to fatherhood.

I used my earlier life challenges and experience to develop programs and services for children, youth, and newcomers in communities across the city of Toronto. Some of these have been services and programs geared to homeless youth, youth in the child welfare system, and youth who experience extreme poverty or violence. Having held leadership positions in several Toronto community agencies, I have seen many situations where young people are in despair. Many face challenges of poverty, some face challenges in just trying to fit in, and others are not supported by their families. One thing I have learned from the thousands of youth I have worked with or talked to is that these situations don't dictate how their future as fathers or mothers will turn out.

When I encounter youth I used to work with, I usually find out how well they are doing. The thing that changed for them and made the biggest difference was trusting a friend, a family member, or other adults. Working with young men and women, I have heard all the excuses in the world for why they will fail. When you're scared and feel ill prepared and unsupported, those excuses become a comfort to you. A better

approach is to connect with the right person or information and use that to change your situation for the better. Working with youth has taught me to trust and support young people because they can succeed when given the right support, opportunity, and most of all love.

There are few places for young men to discuss their fears in general let alone their fears around fatherhood. If you're reading this book you are already one step ahead in becoming a great father. *My Girlfriend's Pregnant!* discusses the fears and gives you information and real stories, just like mine and yours. This book will not solve all of your problems, but it will help lead you to your own answers to questions about becoming a father.

Just remember that you are not alone. Being a father is never going to be easy—but it is always going to be amazing.

Marlon Merraro  
Manager Urban Issues  
Toronto Public Health

# INTRODUCTION

Teenage pregnancy is something we hear a lot about. TV shows like *16 and Pregnant* and *Teen Mom* follow teenage parents before and after the births of their babies and give viewers a sense of what it's like to be young moms and dads. According to some research, shows like these have also helped lower teenage pregnancy rates, leading to increased contraception use in areas where more young viewers tuned in. But critics argue that these programs also glorify teenage pregnancy, making it seem more manageable than it really is. Politicians, meanwhile, treat teenage pregnancy as a problem that needs solving. And teenagers' parents—generally speaking—dread it.

Whether they're condemning young parents, applauding them, or trying to help them, most shows, articles, self-help books, and documentaries dealing with early parenthood focus on moms. When they're portrayed at all, young dads are frequently depicted as irresponsible and uninvolved. Research and social programs also tend to ignore young fathers. They're too often assumed to be uninterested in their kids, disrespectful toward their partners, and undeserving of support. All in all, young men who find themselves fathers can face a lot of stigma.

It's true that some young dads are deadbeats. But a lot of them aren't. Recently, a group of fathers in their teens and twenties sought to shed light



on their realities by producing their *own* documentary called *Dads Matter Too*. In the film, they talk about the stress and challenges associated with fatherhood—but also the joys, and their efforts to play a role in their kids' lives.

“WE ARE QUITE MISUNDERSTOOD. WE DO WANT TO LEARN. WE DO WANT GOOD THINGS. AND WE JUST DON'T WANT TO BE JUDGED WRONG BY ANYONE.”

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“ALL OF US DADS AIN'T JUST SELFISH SCREWUPS. SOME OF US ARE ACTUALLY WILLING AND THERE FOR OUR CHILDREN AND WANNA BE; EVEN THOUGH IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE IT'S NOT PERFECT AND [SOMETIMES] WE CAN'T BE, WE STILL WANT TO BE THERE FOR OUR CHILDREN.”

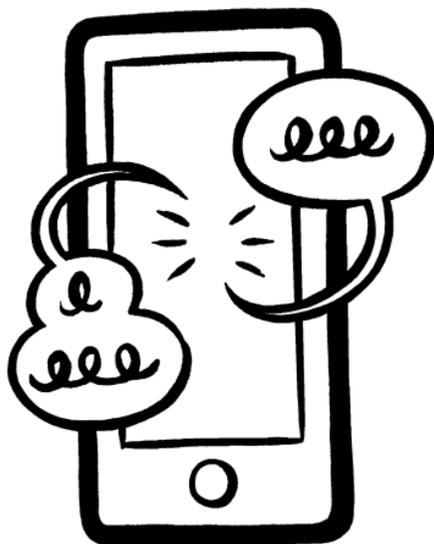
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“FATHERS ARE THERE TOO. AND THEY DO WANT TO BE INVOLVED.”

\*\*\*

“DADS ARE THERE AS WELL, AND WE ARE DOING—MOST DADS ARE ACTUALLY DOING THEIR PART.”





While writing this book, I interviewed many young men across the country. Some of them were single and some were in relationships. Some of them had many kids and some had partners who chose to have abortions. Some were brand new or expectant parents and others considered themselves veterans. Many of them said they wished they had used contraception and were scared to discover they were going to become fathers. All of them were honest about how hard dealing with a pregnancy can be. They talked about the difficulties of choosing—or watching their partners choose—between parenting, adoption, or abortion. They talked about the stress of sleepless nights, diapers, and day care. In many cases, they talked about regret or wishing things had gone differently. But their stories are also a testament to the fact that being a young dad has its ups as well as its downs. Above all, these young

fathers are keen to challenge the assumptions people make about them. And, perhaps most importantly, their stories offer insights to other young men whose lives may be affected by a pregnancy—planned or unplanned. My hope is that this book will therefore help readers understand three things:

- Young dads are not alone.
- Young dads always have options.
- Young dads don't need to accept the assumptions and judgments people make.

# HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

**T**his is one of very few resources on pregnancy and parenthood geared specifically toward *young men*. But for the hundreds of thousands of teenage girls who become pregnant each year in North America and around the world, there are hundreds of thousands of dads in their teens and twenties. In some cases, these young men may never even find out about their partners' pregnancies. And in others, young women may decide to terminate unplanned pregnancies (see Chapter Six for more information on abortion). But no matter the outcome of a pregnancy, knowing about it is sure to have an effect on young fathers. This book explores what it is like to discover that your partner is pregnant; the effects of abortion, adoption, and childbirth on young fathers; the experience of parenthood itself; where to turn for help and support; how parenthood can affect relationships; and much, much more.

You may be reading this book because

- you or someone you know is a young dad or is about to become one
- you're worried or wondering about the *possibility* of becoming a young dad
- your partner is currently deciding how to deal with an unplanned pregnancy
- someone in your life asked you to read it

- you're simply curious about the experiences of young fathers

Whatever your reasons for picking up a copy of this book, there is no right or wrong way to read it. You may decide to go from cover to cover, or to pick and choose from sections that intrigue you. If there's a particular issue you're most interested in, take a look at the index at the very back of the book and find the pages that deal with that topic.

However you choose to read this book, know that it may leave you with more questions than answers. That's largely because there is no "right" way to approach young fatherhood or respond to the news of an unplanned pregnancy. Hopefully the true stories of the young fathers who took part in this project will help you figure out what decisions might be right for you. Also be sure to check out the Further Resources section at the back of this book for a list of other great resources on being a young dad.

