

KIDS WITH KIDS

The extraordinary struggles of real teen parents

By KIM TRANELL with reporting by JANE BIANCHI



Luis stood there, staring at himself in the bathroom mirror.

The 5'10" shooting guard was used to psyching himself up before basketball games. But this was different.



LUIS

Down the hall, he heard the voices of his aunt and uncle, who had stepped in as his legal guardians when he was 9. As Luis thought of all they had **sacrificed** for him, his gut ached. Thoughts raced swiftly through his head:

What if they throw me out? What will I do then?

Just tell them . . . just tell them already.

Luis eventually forced himself to walk into the living room, where his confession spilled out: His girlfriend was pregnant. And in less than 5 months, he'd be a dad.

"My tío [uncle] didn't get angry, but he looked me in the eye, and said, 'You'll need to work twice as hard now,'" Luis remembers. "He wasn't mad. He just wanted me to be prepared."

Now put Luis's story aside for a second and think about your biggest dreams for the future—the road trip you can't wait to take or the city you want to move to that's far away from your boring hometown. Then think about the obstacles that stand in the way, and multiply them by a million. They feel **insurmountable**, right?

That's what we learned from talking with teen parents. They told us having a baby doesn't make your goals unachievable—it just makes them a whole lot harder to reach.



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← Deven Thompson

Age he became a dad: 17
Age of his child: 1 year, 6 months

When Deven was 16, he and his best friend would stay up until 6 a.m. on weekends playing *Call of Duty* on Xbox 360. The fierce competitors would stop only to concoct ridiculous food creations together—ramen mixed with ketchup, pizza topped with avocado. "Staying up didn't matter because I knew I could sleep in," says Deven. "I had nowhere to be."

Then Deven's girlfriend, Meaghan, got pregnant. And in a matter of nine **whirlwind** months, the football-playing, country-music-loving high school senior was standing in a chilly hospital room, holding his entire future in those same hands once glued to a game controller. "I had poop and pee and puke all over me," Deven remembers of that first day with his son, Zachary. "That's when it hit me—I'm a dad now. This is my life."

Now 18 and a high school graduate, Deven is determined to provide for his son. What that looks like: a lot of late nights, which are nothing like those *Call of Duty* marathons. On an average day, Deven returns home from police cadet training at midnight to relieve Meaghan of Zachary duty. He'll fit in a few hours of solid sleep, then he's up again at 5:30 a.m. to dress and feed Zachary before his shift at a sporting goods store.

"The sleep deprivation sucks," he says. "I get migraines. My stomach hurts. Sometimes everything spins."

But the alienation can feel even worse. "All of my friends get to do whatever they want," Deven says. "It's OK, because I made the decisions that led to having a baby. And I love Zachary more than I love myself. But looking back, I should have been smarter."

Deven now saves his video game money to help pay for diapers.





Dominique should be proud: 50 percent of teen moms never graduate from high school.



⬆️ Dominique Brooks

Age she became a mom: 16; Age of her child: 3 years, 11 months

Dominique spent her 16th birthday celebrating with her twin sister, Monique, and all of their friends, eating burgers and roller-skating at a rink in their hometown of Stockton, California. “At 11 p.m. they put on colorful lights and played hip-hop,” she remembers. “We were dancing on our skates and having fun—I didn’t have a worry in the world.”

But just two months later, Dominique learned she was pregnant. And after giving birth to her son, Jayden, that summer, she quickly discovered that the freedoms she had barely even tasted as a teen—the pool parties with the water balloon fights, the “girls’ days” spent eating hot wings and taking tons of selfies—were gone. “All of a sudden, I had to put myself aside,” she says. “Every single thing I did had to be for my child.”

Despite waking up multiple times a night to tend to Jayden and working to scrape together money to buy diapers, Dominique didn’t just manage to stay in school and get good grades—she also became valedictorian and now attends community college on a full scholarship. “I feel like I beat the odds,” she says. “But still, I have this whole other life now. When you have a baby, you’re not a kid anymore. I really wish I could have enjoyed being a teenager.”

What a Baby Costs

These stats will give you a sense of just a few of the financial sacrifices that teen parents make.



Diapers for a year =



128 movie tickets
\$1,020 year



Formula for a year =



6 iPhones
\$1,200



Baby clothes for a year =



10 video games
\$600

MAX WHITTAKER/GETTY IMAGES; DOMINIQUE BROOKS AND SON: SIRI STAFFORD/GETTY IMAGES (DIAPERS); PAGADESIGN/GETTY IMAGES (MOVIE TICKETS); BRIAN HAGIWARA/GETTY IMAGES (FORMULA); PHILIP SOWELS/FUTURE PUBLISHING/GETTY IMAGES (IPHONE); ANDY CRAWFORD/DORLING KINDERSLEY/GETTY IMAGES (BABY CLOTHES); ACTIVISION (VIDEO GAME)

CHRIS HINKLE/GETTY IMAGES (ALL IMAGES)

Luis Chavez ➡️

Age he became a dad: 17
Age of his child: 1 year, 2 months

On most mornings, Luis’s alarm clock probably sounds a lot different from yours. It’s not the sound of chimes or waves, and it doesn’t emanate from a cell phone. It’s the high-pitched cry his daughter, Abril, makes as she wakes up, usually some time around 4:30 a.m. That’s when Luis, 18, drags himself into the kitchen to make a bottle, which he feeds to Abril until she nods off again. Only then can he do the things he used to do after rolling out of bed just before 7 a.m.—brush his teeth, shower, and pack his bags for school and basketball practice.

“Every single morning, I feel so tired,” Luis says. “But I know there’s no turning back. I have a responsibility to give her whatever she needs.”

Sometimes, though, Luis and his girlfriend, Victoria, can’t figure out what it is that Abril needs when she’s crying—and those are the moments in which he feels the most discouraged. He feeds her. He rocks her. He changes her diaper. “It’s like a basketball game where nothing is going in,” he explains, “only a million times more frustrating and the stakes are so much higher.”

If he were older, Luis wonders, would he always know what to do? Would he recognize diaper rash right away or be able to magically cure her upset stomach? Probably not—but that’s the paradox of being a teen dad: Luis often feels like a kid, but he has to make decisions like a parent.

“With everything you do, there are consequences. In this case, it was a beautiful consequence,” Luis says. “But if we’d had the baby later, it definitely would have been easier.”



Luis says being a parent is the longest and hardest job—one that you never get paid for.

Become a parent when YOU are ready.

Even though you would probably say you don’t want to be a teen parent, have you really thought about what it takes to prevent pregnancy? The truth is, the more you know, the better prepared you will be. Visit StayTeen.org to get all the facts—so you can make your own smart decisions.