

PATRICIA KELLY

STUDYGUIDE

ISSUE 31 AUSTRALIAN SCREEN EDUCATION



# Plumpton High Babies





#### SYNOPSIS

They're schoolgirls—dreaming of the future, wanting to go out and have fun, trying to work out relationships with families, friends and boyfriends—and attempting to finish high school while raising their babies.



Plumpton High, in Sydney's outer western suburbs, is one of only a few schools in Australia with a programme that supports schoolgirl mothers completing their education, integrating them into the general student population. Over 100 girls have been helped by the programme since it began. This year, thirteen are enrolled.

*Plumpton High Babies* follows a year in the lives of some of these young mothers as they hurtle from girlhood to womanhood. **Baby**, at 15, is the youngest—just a child herself. **Simone**, considered one of the school's star students, is 16 and three months pregnant. **Crystal** is finding it tough with a toddler and nowhere to live. **Jasmine**, with her eight-month-old son, has been in the programme longer than any other girl; now her twin sister is pregnant. And expelled student **Jessica** is being accepted back for one reason only - she too is 15 and expecting.



So what does it take to help a teenager with a baby stay at school? At Plumpton, the dedicated and passionate principal and programme coordinator offer understanding, a supportive environment, flexible hours and practical health and welfare assistance as well as constant encouragement. But the outcome depends on the girls.

#### CURRICULUM LINKS

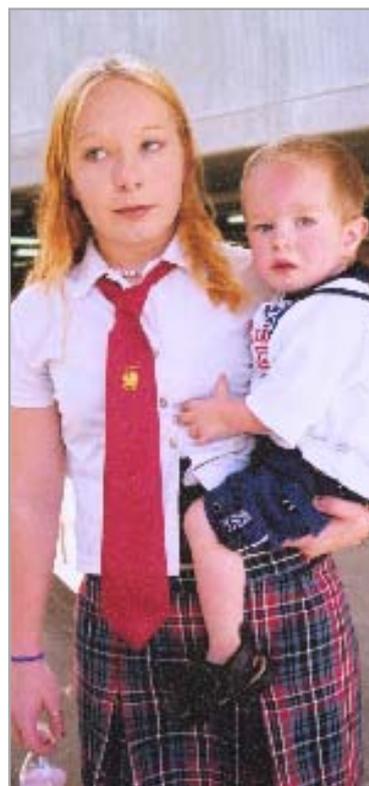
*Plumpton High Babies* is relevant to Health, Human Relations and Personal Development, English, Studies Of Society and Environment, Gender Studies, Human Services and youth, family and parenting studies.

This study guide is written with classroom use in mind, however the series is also highly suitable for use in professional development and teacher education activities relating to student welfare and school counselling as well as aspects of school equity policy development.

#### PROGRAMME CLASSIFICATION AND CONTENT

The series has received a PG (parental guidance recommended) classification with the consumer advice: adult themes, low level coarse language. Programme

CAPTIONS: PREVIOUS PAGE: SIMONE AND MARK WITH ASHTON. LEFT TOP-BOTTOM: NATACHA AND BABY KALEBH (FOREGROUND) WITH SOME OF THE OTHER YOUNG MUMS AND THEIR BABIES; SIMONE & ASHTON. ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY LORRIE GRAHAM. ABOVE: PLUMPTON HIGH PUPIL BABY WITH WRITER/DIRECTOR AVIVA ZIEGLER HOLDING BABY'S SON JEREMIAH. BELOW: CRYSTAL AND HER SON BRIAN



content includes a sex education scene involving placing a condom on a plastic model of a penis (Episode 2, photographs of Jacinta's baby, who was stillborn (Episode 3) and a birth scene (Episode 4). These are all filmed tastefully but some schools may find them inappropriate or may wish to alert students before showing the programme.

#### THEMES

##### 1. PREGNANCY AND BIRTH: SETTING THE SCENE

Any discussions relating to human sexuality involve skills of listening and responding appropriately and respectfully to a variety of opinions, some of which may be extremely polarized. It is important to outline these expectations to ensure that discussion about the issues can occur in a supportive and respectful environment. Since all cultures love babies and have rituals and celebrations associated with birth, the suggested opening discussion and activities may be a good introduction to the more challenging topics raised by the series.

#### DISCUSSION

- Encourage students to acknowl-

edge and share the differing cultural customs and celebrations around pregnancy and birth in a multicultural society. Ask students to contribute to discussion areas including:

- announcing a pregnancy
- appropriate food for a pregnant mother
- any taboos or restrictions
- any differences regarding the birth of a boy or a girl.

#### ACTIVITIES

- Create a baby photo gallery, with each student's photo accompanied by a short caption describing where and when it was taken, by whom and why it is special.
- Write a card to friends from a different cultural group, congratulating them on the birth of a child. What expressions are used in that culture to congratulate someone on the birth of a child? For example, Greek speakers could say, 'Na sas zissei', meaning 'May this child live for you'.
- What birth-related customs can students identify? For example, many cultures have the concept of the 'evil eye' and may attach amulets or herbs to a baby's clothes to protect it.



CAPTIONS: TOP-BOTTOM: PLUMPTON HIGH PUPIL BABY WITH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL GLENN SARGEANT HOLDING BABY'S SON JEREMIAH: FRONT ROW (L-R) BABY & JEREMIAH, SIMONE & ASHTON, NATACHA & KALEBH. BACK ROW (L-R) CRYSTAL & BRIAN, JASMIN & BRAYDEN, KIRSTY & EVAN. OPPOSITE TOP: (L-R) BABY & JEREMIAH, CRYSTAL & BRIAN, JASMIN & BRAYDEN, REBECCA COWIN (CO-ORDINATOR OF PLUMPTON HIGH SCHOOL'S YOUNG MOTHERS PROGRAM) & KALEBH, NATACHA, KIRSTY & EVAN, SIMONE & ASHTON

- What behaviours are considered appropriate or inappropriate by different cultures in handling new babies?

## 2. TEENAGE PREGNANCY

#### KEY FACTS

- The numbers of teenagers giving birth has decreased significantly since the 1970s.
- There were 11,704 babies born to teenage mothers in Australia in 2001. The teenage birth rate for the one per cent of the population living in remote areas was seven times the rate for cities.
- Young women who become mothers during school years rarely complete Year 12.
- A high percentage will live in poverty for the rest of their lives.<sup>1</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

- Using any episode or the entire series, what evidence can students produce that some or all of these young people are at risk of being part of a welfare cycle?
- Which of the young parents featured in the programmes do they feel are





least likely or most likely to fail or succeed?

- What courses might have helped these young people to avoid pregnancy in the first place?
- What factors might account for the high teenage birth rate in remote areas?

#### ACTIVITIES

- Use the following excerpt from a Queensland research paper as a student quiz. Tell students that a research study has identified five main ways in which adolescent and adult pregnant women differ and ask them in small groups to work out what these ways might be. Then compare their thoughts with the actual findings and ask them to suggest possible reasons for the differences.

A comparison of adolescent and adult women visiting Children by Choice shows that teenagers do not fit the same pattern as adults in a number of ways:

1. Teenage women are more likely to be dealing with their first pregnancy.
2. Teenagers usually present [for



support services] further into their pregnancy.

3. Teenagers are less likely to attend the service on their own. They are likely to be accompanied by a parent or a partner.
4. Teenagers are more likely to be single, and less likely to have ever been married.
5. Teenagers are more likely to be students (usually high school) or unemployed.<sup>12</sup>

By Year 12, fifty per cent of all Australian teenagers have had sex, according to a 1997 survey. This has not changed significantly since 1992. The following findings are worth considering:

*Young people were highly informed about the transmission of HIV/AIDS.*

*Knowledge about other blood borne viruses was low.*

*Most young people believed it was unlikely they would be infected by HIV/AIDS or other STDs.*

*A substantial majority of young people continue to engage in high risk practices.<sup>13</sup>*

#### ACTIVITY

- Ask students to research one of the areas in which they lack information and prepare an informative poster or pamphlet or health promotion advertisement for radio or television directed at adolescents. They can display these as posters and explain what they have tried to do or perform the advertisements for the class.

### 3. THE YOUNG MOTHERS

These are the young mothers featured in *Plumpton High Babies* along with some of their comments.

Jacinta is sixteen and lives with her mother. Her previous high school expelled her for bad behaviour and this is her second chance. She says, 'I don't have that much confidence as everyone says. I'm pretty low in confidence.'

Jasmine has an unsteady relationship with boyfriend Dale; we see her break up with him, move back and then split again. She says, 'It's actually getting quite nasty—he told me he wanted the ring back. My engagement ring ... I'm going to go for sole custody as well. If Dale wants to get nasty, I'll get nasty too.'

Simone says '... you see all these babies that are goo-ing and gaa-ing and giggling and you think, oh that's gonna be really easy. So then you get a rude shock.'

Crystal. Her mother-in-law Sharon says, 'Crystal once said to me, "Oh I had Brian because I wanted someone to love me and someone to love"'. Crystal moves into a council flat for single mothers. She says, 'It's totally free. I guess it's any teenager's dream to live by themselves.'

Krystle chose to terminate her pregnancy. 'The boyfriend, he doesn't want me to have it. Full stop, no questions asked ... Thinks he's too young. Almost eighteen and too young.' Her friend Amanda says, 'She should sort her life out before she brings another life in. I think she's smart. I think she's tops.'

Jasmine. 'I've got two years of school and then I'm going to do enrolled nursing for two years and then ... change it to be a registered nurse.'

Baby is 15. She says, 'I reckon I have hurt my mum so much.'

Natacha says, 'I thought, it's just going to be nappies a bit of crying. I didn't expect it to be when they're sick they're gonna cry and all that.'

Kirsty has her baby but her boyfriend doesn't want her to return to school. 'He thinks that because I've had a baby, it's my job to stay home with the baby and all that stuff, but ...'

Jessica. 'I've turned around. Well, I'll be honest with you. I've been in trouble with the police once ... It's gonna make me cry that I'm going back to school.'

#### DISCUSSION

- Which of these girls seem to have the best chance of staying at school?

- Do you agree with Natacha's thoughts about babies?
- What are the positive and negative aspects of living as part of an extended family? How might these affect a young mother?
- How might increased self-confidence and assertiveness make a difference in the decisions young girls make about sex?
- What are the potential problems with the reason that Crystal gives for becoming a parent?

#### ACTIVITIES

Ask students to:

- Choose one of the girls and identify the positive and negative factors in her life. How does each factor impact on her as we see her life across the time scale of a year, in these programmes? Students could present this as diary entries or an annotated timeline.
- Identify what Kirsty might mean by 'all that stuff'. What are the arguments her boyfriend is using? Organize two advisory teams, one to support Kirsty and one to support her boyfriend. Give each side ten minutes to put their points of view to the whole group and then allow time for questions from the audience.
- Survey ten other teenagers on their response to Crystal's statement about living alone. How many agree?
- Use one or more of the episodes to provide evidence of what Simone might mean by 'a rude shock'.
- Set their alarm one night to wake them up every two hours; get up for five minutes and keep a short diary about how they feel after just one night's disturbed sleep. Share the best entries from their journals with the group.
- Investigate smoking and pregnancy. What are the facts? What are the risks for mother and child?
- Interview their own mothers, or a mother they know, about their experiences of motherhood and how it changed their lives. They can write this as a radio interview, a short story or as a script for a documentary.

#### 4. MAKING DECISIONS: ABORTION

Abortion is a controversial topic but according to the Family Planning Association up to half of all teenage pregnancies are thought to be terminated in Australia each year. In *Family Planning Perspectives* there is a detailed but accessible report on what influences Australian teenagers to continue or terminate pregnancies (see references).

Thompson and Liddy, members of the Children by Choice Association, state:

*It is especially difficult for young women to consider realistically the impact of their choice on all aspects of their future. Some young women, unable to make a decision about an unplanned pregnancy, will become mothers by default rather than by choice.<sup>4</sup>*

#### DISCUSSION

- Outline the cases for and against abortion or termination of pregnancy.
- What does 'by default rather than by choice' mean? What problems are associated with this?
- What local area services might provide support and counselling services for young people to help them make their decision? Who else might be involved in the process?

#### ACTIVITY

- Invite students onto a panel to help support Krystle in making her decision. They may take a pro or anti-abortion stance. Research the arguments and then present them for class appraisal.

#### 5. THE DEATH OF A CHILD

Birth and death are obviously significant life cycle events. Despite even the best care, some babies die. Jacinta's first baby died *in utero* and was still-born.

In the past in hospitals, still-born babies were removed and mothers never saw them. This practice has now changed. Jacinta says, 'At first I was scared to hold him because I didn't wanna ... deal with that. And then I ended up holding him; everyone else in the family held

him. And then they took some photos and footprints and handprints.'

#### DISCUSSION

- How might these two different ways of dealing with the death of a baby affect the families involved?
- How did Jacinta express and try to come to terms with her feelings?
- Australia has a very low rate of infant mortality by international standards but it is still about one per cent overall and much higher among Indigenous communities. In many developing countries the rate is above twenty per cent. These differences are a link to discussing issues of equity and development at national and global levels.

#### ACTIVITY

- Research rates of infant mortality in another country or for Indigenous Australians. What factors influence infant mortality? (*New Internationalist* magazine is a good source of information and is available online at [www.newint.org](http://www.newint.org))

#### 6. EDUCATION

Very few schools are prepared to support pregnant and mothering students to continue their education. Plumpton High is one of a few schools around Australia with a special programme. Its Young Mothers Program integrates these students into the general school population.

Consider:

*Australian surveys show that eighty-five per cent of teenagers think that information on sex and contraception should be available before age sixteen, but that barely half received any sex education at school and only about half could discuss sex with their parents.*<sup>5</sup>

The principal of Plumpton High, Glenn Sargeant, says:

*If, as a society, we are going to feed our young people images on television and in magazines that sexualize them and encourage them to engage in adult behaviours, then we have to deal with the results.*

#### BARRIERS TO EDUCATION FOR YOUNG MOTHERS-TO-BE AND MOTHERS INCLUDE:

1. *Self-consciousness due to changes in appearance and illness*
2. *Parenting related barriers, including childcare and financial problems*
3. *Personal barriers, including emotional and stress related issues*
4. *Family related barriers, associated with the level of support received at home*
5. *Relationship barriers, including relationships with peers and partners*
6. *Educational and community attitude barriers, linked with common perceptions*
7. *Practical barriers such as housing and transport.*<sup>6</sup>

#### DISCUSSION

- Which of these barriers do students think is the most significant for these young women?
- Most schools do not want pregnant girls to remain at school. What reasons might they have for this attitude? What effects might this have on girls and their education? What are the equity and policy issues for schools? What rights, if any, do students think are at stake? Does the law offer any protection for these young women?
- What makes Plumpton High so special in the lives of these girls?
- Discuss the roles and attitudes of the staff we see in the series, including the principal, Glenn Sargeant, and the coordinator, Rebecca Cowin. How do the girls and their parents respond?
- Jacinta becomes pregnant again. What might have led her to her decision? How might a second child impact on her life and educational opportunities?

#### ACTIVITIES

- Ask students to prioritize which of these barriers to education would pose the biggest barrier for them and give reasons why. (Support from the young woman's family was the most frequently mentioned critical factor in research.)
- Choose any of the scenes in

which the girls are discussing their progress with one of the staff. What might be the thoughts behind the words? Write an internal dialogue to accompany the actual dialogue of the programme. Set up a page with two columns, one for action and actual dialogue and one for the internal thoughts of each person.

#### 7. DEVELOPING TIME MANAGEMENT SKILLS

Many of the girls who decide to keep their babies find it difficult to juggle motherhood and study. Their time management skills are often not very effective and babies make this even harder. To help them with this challenge, the Young Mothers Program at Plumpton High encourages goal setting.

#### ACTIVITY

- Using a worksheet from a goal setting web site, ask students to set their goals for the coming year. These could be revisited at various stages during the year and revised in the light of changing circumstances. Some time after having completed their sheet, ask students to reflect on their achievements and assess the benefits of having some kind of written document. Templates for this activity can be downloaded from: [www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/goals.html](http://www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/goals.html) or <http://www.technori.com/2013/04/4259-the-most-effective-goal-setting-plan-youll-ever-find-2/>

#### 8. PARENTING

Becoming a parent can be a daunting task at any age. All of the girls' and boys' parents who appear in these programmes are trying to be supportive of their children. Some may seem more successful than others.

#### DISCUSSION

- What are some different parenting styles?
- What is meant by effective parenting?
- How do people learn to be parents?
- What preparation have most adolescent boys had to prepare them for

the responsibilities of fatherhood?

- While the programmes focus on the experiences of the young mothers, there are also some opportunities to observe the young fathers. Based on that evidence, how would you rate their ability to cope with the situation?

#### ACTIVITIES

- Identify some effective parenting programmes in your area and either attend a session and report on findings or review one book about effective parenting and report on it. The report must include at least one useful hint.
- List your expectations of your ideal future partner as the father or mother of a child you might like to have. You can write this in the form of a chart of duties for a twenty-four hour period. So, for example, who would get up when the baby cries at midnight, or 2 a.m.? Who would prepare breakfast, do the washing, the ironing, the shopping, bathing the baby? If the class has both sexes, compare lists.
- Would students' expectations be any different if both parents were working or if one parent was at home?
- Watch a film such as the classic *Kramer vs Kramer* (Robert Berton, 1979) the Czech film *Kolya*, (Jan Svěrák, 1996) the English film *Billy Elliott* (Stephen Daldry, 2000) or the Indian film *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001) for some interesting variations on the responsibilities of fatherhood across cultures. What qualities are similar? What cultural aspects seem different?
- Listen to songs such as John Lennon's *Beautiful Boy*, which he wrote for his son Sean. Write a response.
- Invite a parenting or relationships counsellor to speak to students.

#### 9. FILM-MAKING

Director Aviva Ziegler says, 'The year at Plumpton was ... possibly the best film-making experience I've had in thirty years ... It wasn't only a pleasure and privilege but also an important story I had to tell.'

#### DISCUSSION

- After watching the series, what is it about these girls, their families, the school and the problems faced that might have inspired the director to make this comment?
- How is the close association between the director and the characters evident in the way the programmes are filmed?
- What parts of the story resonated with you?
- What stylistic elements can you identify that contribute to, sustain or heighten the drama within the programmes?

#### RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Education Services has lesson plans on various health related topics using statistics to help students to analyse health factors relevant to this topic, such as smoking and exercise. You will find these from the web site which offers lesson plans by KLA as well as other resources linked to the topics. These are also available in hardcopy. Search for 'Australia Now Lesson Plans' from the home page at [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au).

Ruth Chambers, Gill Wakley and Steph Chambers, *Tackling Teenage Pregnancy: sex, culture and needs*, Radcliffe Medical, Oxon, UK, 2001.

Children By Choice Association web site - [www.childrenbychoice.org.au](http://www.childrenbychoice.org.au)

Ann Evans, 'The Influence of Significant Others on Australian Teenagers: Decisions About Pregnancy Resolution', *Family Planning Perspectives*, vol. 33, no. 5, September/October 2001, accessible from <https://www.gutmacher.org/about/journals/psrh/2001/09/influence-significant-others-australian-teenagers-decisions-about>

E. Wynhausen, 'Maternity High' in *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 15-16 February 2003, pp. 16-19.

*Study Guide prepared by Patricia Kelly, a Brisbane-based writer and academic.*

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#### PLUMPTON HIGH BABIES

A Film Australia National Interest Program produced in association with 220 Productions. Produced with the assistance of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

**DIRECTOR:** Aviva Zeigler

**PRODUCER:** Julian Russell

**EXECUTIVE PRODUCER:** Mark Hamlyn

**YEAR OF PRODUCTION:** 2002

**DURATION:** 4 x 26 minutes

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#### ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Kay Boulden, 'Teenage Pregnancy in Australia' extract from *Present, Pregnant and Proud*, Association of Women Educators, Sandgate, Queensland, 2000. [www.sev.com.au/awe](http://www.sev.com.au/awe)
- <sup>2</sup> Claire Thompson and Unna Liddy, *Sex, lies and young people*, [www.holysmoke.org/sdhok/fem077.htm](http://www.holysmoke.org/sdhok/fem077.htm)
- <sup>3</sup> Family Planning Association of QLD [www.fpq.asn.au/lfactsheets&brochures/student%20info%20sheets/Teenage%20sexuality%20pregnancy%20and%20abortion.pdf](http://www.fpq.asn.au/lfactsheets&brochures/student%20info%20sheets/Teenage%20sexuality%20pregnancy%20and%20abortion.pdf)
- <sup>4</sup> Claire Thompson and Unna Liddy, op.cit.
- <sup>5</sup> ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Adapted from B. Fahey and V. Vale, *Young Mothers of the West: an exploration of support and issues surrounding young pregnant and parenting women from Western Sydney in State secondary education*, Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils Ltd, 2002.

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