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## What Sarah Palin should have said, but didn't say

By Saul D. Hoffman

Welcome to Teen Pregnancy, 2008: The Sequel.

Just six weeks after TV star Jamie Lynn Spears gave birth at age 17, we learned of the pregnancy of 17 year-old Bristol Palin.

The Palin family issued a statement full of support and love for their daughter. "We're proud of Bristol's decision to have her baby," they wrote "and even prouder to become grandparents.... She knows she has our unconditional love and support." Acting in their role as parents, the Palins did exactly what they should have done. Bristol and her partner, Levi, will need their help.

But, like it or not, Sarah Palin is no longer just a parent. She is a public figure. And in that capacity, her statement is woefully inadequate. Here is what she should have gone on to say.

"I regret that Bristol and Levi did not act more responsibly. Parenting is a very difficult and important endeavor and it is better left to adults. I hope that no teen will try to emulate my daughter's behavior, thinking that, if it is okay for the daughter of a candidate for Vice President, then it is okay for them.

"And I hope that all parents of teens – parents of sons and parents of daughters – will use this as a teaching moment and have an adult conversation about an adult topic. Please impress on your teens the need to act responsibly in the world of sexual relations. Parenthood is far too important to arrive at without serious forethought. The best pregnancies are planned ones.

"A great deal of research by social scientists fully documents the negative effects of a teen birth. Teen mothers are less likely to graduate high school and, although they do often manage to make up for that with a GED, they are much less likely to go on to college than otherwise similar girls who delay their first birth until their early 20s. And everyone knows how important higher education is in today's economy.

"The children of teen mothers fare much less well than their counterparts. They are more likely to be the subjects of abuse or neglect or placed in foster care. They are less likely to graduate from high school and less likely to attend college. The daughters are substantially more likely to become teen mothers themselves. The sons are far more likely to be incarcerated at some point in their lives.

"The research shows that all of these outcomes would be improved if teen mothers waited until at least their early 20s to have their first birth.

"These negative outcomes associated with teen births cost the rest of us a substantial sum of money, money that could be spent on far more useful things. A major national report calculated that the total cost of teen births in 2004 to state governments and the federal government was upwards of \$9 billion. In fact, it cost my own state of Alaska \$15 million and that is \$15 million too much.

"The United States has a teen birth rate that is five to ten times the rates in countries like France, Denmark, and the Netherlands – countries that one doesn't usually think of as prudish. And we can no longer take pride in the fact that the teen birth rate is falling year after year.

"Yes, the teen birth rate did fall 14 years in a row from 1991 to 2005, falling about one-third in the process; I am happy to say that Alaska had the 8th largest decline. But in 2006, the latest year for which national data have been released, the teen birth rate kicked up by three percent. And that troubles me.

"I have been an advocate for abstinence-only sex education for teens. But I understand that the most recent scientific evaluation of this kind of program by Douglas Kirby, published in a top research journal, concluded that 'most abstinence programs did not delay initiation of sex and only 3 of 9 [programs] had any significant positive effects on any sexual behavior.' In contrast, Kirby finds that comprehensive sexual education programs showed much stronger evidence of positive results on young people's sexual behavior. I understand that public policy must have a scientific basis. I promise to rethink my position on appropriate sex education for teens.

"I would be upset if my daughter's pregnancy indirectly contributed to an increase in the teen birth rate. I pledge that, if elected, I will work to make sure that the prevention of teen pregnancy becomes an important domestic policy issue."

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