

# KIDS HAVING

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## Children

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to complete her studies.

As the school bell rings to signal the end of another day, the hallways erupt into a chorus of chatter, slamming locker doors, cracking bubble gum and laughter.

A group of girls shuffle past, heading toward the gymnasium, with knee pads dangling around their ankles. Many students rush off with book bags slung over their shoulders.

With Laing at his side, Hopkins pushes his way through the crowd, toting their daughter in a portable infant seat.

"I was surprised he stayed with me," Laing says. "I didn't think he would ... I knew Isaiah was a player."

"I thought it was just one of those fling things, then he'd go off on his way," she said. "I've hardly met any other (teen-age) parents who still have their dads with them."

Hopkins says being a father has helped him grow up and be able to give Laing the kind of support she needs to go to school and take care of their baby.

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**Sometimes I get scared of having all that responsibility, and I just start to push it away.**

— Hopkins teenage father

"Sometimes I get scared of having all that responsibility, and I just start to push it away," Hopkins says.

He has had run-ins before with the police, but now takes care to avoid people and situations that could lead to trouble.

"I don't want to be in jail one night when Teionna needs me, and I don't even know it."

Of the 82 pregnant or parenting women in Lincoln High School last year, only nine had the fathers join them in the school's student-parent program.

Of the fathers who do not marry, 65 percent will give support, but only 44 percent continue giving it after two years.

Together, Laing and Hopkins drop Teionna off at the day care center before classes and pick her up at the end of the day.

The help she's received from Hopkins and her family has been vital. But the school program has been the biggest factor allowing her to continue her education.

"There's no way I would have come back to school this year without the day-care program," Laing said.

Lincoln High is the first school in Lancaster County to offer day care for students. Laing must spend one class period a day in the program center helping take care of the children and learning parenting skills.

The program is aimed at keeping young mothers from dropping out of school.

Only 20 percent of mothers who give birth before age 17 finish high school. Only 10 percent of women who give birth before age 17 are employed, and 53 percent of abusive mothers had birth during their teens.

The Lincoln High program aims at beating the statistics.

"We could ignore (teen-age pregnancy) and do nothing, but it's not going to go away," Pillar said. "It's our responsibility to teach them how to be parents."

Nelson said: "You have to hope you can make some difference."

The skills and knowledge Laing has gained from the program will become more vital as



Laing shares a room with her daughter in her parents house. In her new two-bedroom house she will also share sleeping space with her. Laing said she couldn't believe she crammed a crib and baby stuff into the already tiny room.



Laing and her future housemate Jessica Cle acquainted in the Child Care Center. The girls about a three-day age difference.



Kristi Laing and Isaiah Hopkins travel through the halls of school in the morning on their way to the Child Care Center. Laing's front of school so Hopkins helps her carry the baby to the center while she totes school books, bottles and diapers.

she strides toward greater independence.

Last week, Laing moved into a small house on her own. Another 18-year-old mother in the program will move in with her soon.

The two will find parenting only one of the many challenges they will face in this new situation.

After paying for rent, food and necessities for their babies, the two women figure they'll have just enough money to survive.

Sitting at the kitchen table in her new home, Laing reflects on her pregnancy.

Although she has grown from the experience, Laing says she was not mature enough to have a baby.

"I honestly don't know any teen-agers who are ready to have a kid," said Laing. "I mean, a lot of grown people aren't even ready to have a kid."

Laing smiles as she looks across the table at Teionna who is drifting asleep in Hopkins' arms.

"I love her," Laing says. "I never would have given her away."

"But if I could have waited, I would have."

**Cathi Owen, 19, hugs Laing while visiting her at school. Owen graduated last year when Laing should have. She said, "All my friends are gone, I never talk to anybody at school."**

