

Teenage mothers get help to finish school

Terra Centre, Braemar School team up for young moms struggling with adult responsibilities

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Cassidy Wallis says having a baby helped her get back on the right track.

"Emma saved my life," says Wallis, 18, who held her 12-week-old daughter in her arms during a Mother's Day breakfast at Braemar School on Friday.

"I wasn't going in a good direction. I was partying a lot and skipping school. I was failing all of my courses."

Braemar School, along with the Terra Centre for pregnant and parenting teens, hosted a Mother's Day breakfast for the 92 teen moms who attend the school.

The Terra Centre and Braemar School are partners with the same goal -- to support and encourage young parents to complete their high school education, says Karen Mottershead, Terra executive director.

Teen mothers need a tremendous amount of support, Mottershead says.

"Their plates are so full and they are so overburdened. They sometimes spend hours a day just trying to co-ordinate transportation to get here."

Wallis spends an hour and a half on the bus to get to school in the morning and says she feels overwhelmed most of the time. With the responsibility that comes with motherhood comes the stigma attached to being a teen mom.

"Lots of my friends left me behind when I found out I was pregnant," she says. "Nobody wants to hang out with somebody who's pregnant."

She has made new friends at Braemar School though.

Eighteen-year-old Dana Johnston understands what it is like to have people make assumptions about the kind of person she is. She has had to deal with the judgment of people who think that because she is a teen mom, she must be on welfare and going nowhere.

"Those people are pushing you down so that it's harder to believe in yourself," says



CREDIT: Bruce Edwards, the Journal

Dana Johnston holding her son Kayen, 2, left, and Cassidy Wallis with three-month-old daughter, Emma, enjoy the Mother's Day breakfast at the Terra Centre for pregnant and parenting teenage moms on Friday.

Johnston, who

became pregnant at 15 in the summer of 2006.

She says her relationship with her boyfriend ended by the time she was three months pregnant.

"I thought, 'Oh great -- I'm three months pregnant and now I'm doing it by myself and I'm 15 years old,' " she says.

She credits Terra with helping her regain her confidence, and says she has learned she can do something with her life. She has been accepted to the University of Alberta but hopes to go to Grant MacEwan to study nursing.

Wallis wants to pursue a career as an X-ray/ultrasound technician.

Between school and motherhood, she and Johnston act as ambassadors for Terra, speaking at schools to other teens about what it is like to be a mother.

For one part of their presentation, they have students fill out a pie chart to show how they think their time would be spent if they were parents.

"It was surprising what they thought -- that they were going to get 14 hours of sleep a day and then six hours of free time on top of that," Johnston laughs. "Your free time is when you're sleeping."

Though her schedule is hectic -- she jokes that sometimes it's OK to come to school in pyjamas -- Johnston says she wouldn't change anything.

"When they start talking to you and saying, 'I love you mommy' -- that's the best feeling ever."

about terra - Terra has been operating since 1971. - The onsite child-care centre can accommodate 64 infants and toddlers. - Terra is a non-profit agency that serves about 600 young parents every year. -Programs offered include individual counselling, parenting support, housing support and prenatal classes - For more e information visit www.terraassociation.com

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