

HEARTS OF THE CITY

Exploring
attitudes and
issues behind
the news.

The Beat

Today's centerpiece focuses on **Grandparents and Books**, a program in which adult volunteers 50 or older spend afternoons reading literature to grade-school children at Los Angeles Public Library branches across the city. For more information, call (213) 228-7487.

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Navigating the Real World



A rotating panel of experts from the worlds of ethics, psychology and religion offer their perspective on the dilemmas that come with living in Southern California.

Today's Question: In Orange County over the last two years, at least 15 girls under the age of 18, most of them pregnant at the time, have been helped by social workers to marry or continue living with their adult male sex partners instead of treating them as victims of child abuse or statutory rape. Juvenile Court judges have the authority to let them marry, although recommendations of social workers carry much weight. Do you tend to favor a case-by-case evaluation of circumstances, such as parental consent and the age differences involved, or stronger enforcement of statutory rape laws?

Richard Mouw

President, Fuller Theological Seminary

Let's be clear about the moral facts: An adult male living out of wedlock with a pregnant adolescent is indeed bad news! Our only options are either to dissolve the relationship or try to strengthen whatever signs of health might be present. In the former case, statutory rape laws give us room to move. In the latter case, counseling that leads to marriage can be a good thing. Legally, both options need to be kept open. But I do find it difficult to be hopeful about weddings recommended by caseworkers and performed by judges. Is it too much to hope for a partnership here with the churches and synagogues?

Compiled by JOHN DART, Times staff writer

Dennis Prager

Host of a daily KABC radio talk show; writer of the Prager Perspective, a biweekly newsletter

This is a complex issue that does not allow for one, universal response since an 18-year-old and a 13-year-old girl often have little in common. Having said that, the question betrays the distorted priorities of too many social workers. Their first priority is often "family reunification"—which commonly means having a 13-year-old girl live with her inseminator—rather than the welfare of the newborn. We would solve many of society's problems by making adoption, not family reunification, our primary goal. Children could not care less about egg and sperm. All they care about is having love, stability and a mother and father. That's all we should care about. Adoption is also better for the young birth mother. Burdened with a child, her prospects are as bleak as the prospects of the child she keeps.

Orli Peter

Associate professor of psychology; director, Marriage, Family & Child Counseling Program at Mount St. Mary's College

Because of the disparity in their ages, sex between a teenage girl and an adult man cannot be considered consensual, either legally or psychologically. Such a relationship is sexual abuse. Victims of nonviolent sexual abuse commonly love their perpetrators, especially during the initial stages of the abuse. Permitting such a girl to marry the perpetrator extends and legitimizes an abusive relationship. Nor can such a marriage be expected to last very long: Pregnant teenagers are the highest risk group for divorce. Of course, even though a teenage victim should not marry her perpetrator, his wages should be garnished for the next 18 years to help support their child.