

Soap Opera in the Classroom*

Michael F. Sullivan



Anne, a teenage mother, unwillingly listens to some advice from her mother.

Young people need to learn about pressing issues such as parenthood and family development. Educators in Maryland are using a soap opera format to convey these important lessons.

"Maybe it's a mistake. Maybe they're wrong. Doctors make mistakes. Lab tests get mixed up . . ."

"I haven't had any test. I just know I'm pregnant."

"You mean all this is sheer speculation? You're only guessing! Listen, if you find out something's really wrong, you let me know."

If this sounds like a soap opera, it's because it is; a continuing story of people getting pregnant, having babies, suffering miscarriages, and leaving spouses when the strain becomes too great. The difference between this soap opera and the ones on daytime TV is that this program is on instructional television and is intended for students in high school classrooms.

Tomorrow's Families is a series of 30 lessons designed to expose young people to pregnancy and child-bearing. The series, which was produced by the Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Instructional Television, is one effort toward helping to solve the problem of teen-age pregnancy and parenthood. The idea behind the series is that young people often have romantic and unrealistic ideas about parenthood, and therefore do not make rational, informed decisions about

* For information on how to obtain this series, write: Agency for Instructional Television, Box A, Bloomington, Indiana 47401.

when to have, and how to prepare for having, children.

Tomorrow's Families shows young people dealing with these decisions and coping with the consequences of their acts. Some couples plan and decide very carefully. Others act rashly or suffer through a traumatic experience such as an unplanned pregnancy. The viewers see, in dramatic fashion, what happens if a couple receives inadequate instruction in prenatal care or decides to have children for the wrong reasons.

There are some subtle differences between *Tomorrow's Families* and *The Young and The Restless* or *Search for Tomorrow*. *Tomorrow's Families* begins each episode with a short introduction by Greg Morris and ends each episode with a concluding statement from Morris. The events occurring within the story do not include the murders, suicides, and extortion so regularly seen on commercial soap operas. And the most significant difference is that *Tomorrow's Families* is viewed in a classroom under the direction of a qualified teacher who has been given a teacher's



Shirley presents the image of a mature, caring parent.

Greg Morris hosts *Tomorrow's Families*.



guide that contains objectives, activities, and additional content and resources.

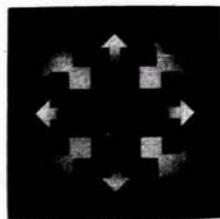
Psychologists, physicians, home economics educators, health educators, nutritionists, and others interested in the problem of teen-age parenthood developed the content and outline for the series. These professionals, as well as representatives from other disciplines, evaluated the project at every stage.

The series has been field-tested in Maryland high schools with satisfying results. Even the most skeptical students become involved in the story and are able to recall the problems and mistakes endured by the characters. One 30-minute lesson, even without a class discussion, sometimes changes the students' attitudes towards an important aspect of pregnancy or parenthood.

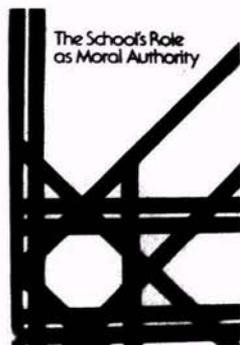
The series begins with a lesson on self-awareness, which stresses the idea that you have to fully understand yourself before you can consider the decision for parenthood. Succeeding lessons deal with the factors that should be considered when

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making the decision. Particular attention is paid to economic, social, and health factors. One lesson deals entirely with the implications of deciding not to have children.

Following these first shows are lessons about pregnancy, delivery, and hospital care. Then the program focuses on caring for the infant and making adjustments in the family to help all members cope with the demands of caring for a new infant. There are four lessons that deal with the development of the infant and one lesson that reviews the problems of the new families.

The actors on *Tomorrow's Families* are skilled professionals. Many are recognizable from roles on commercial television. Most importantly, they are believable. Many of them found themselves identifying strongly with the characters they portrayed. Many students also identify with the characters, such as the young woman who wants to become pregnant because she is afraid of losing her husband, and the young man who resents his child because he is no longer the center of attention.

The greatest benefit that can be derived from *Tomorrow's Families* may be received by the children of these students. They are the ones who should be wanted, loved, and cared for in a manner that reflects the education their parents were provided by this series. All of the effort that went into the development and production of the series will have been worthwhile if even one child has a better life because of it.

Young people need to learn about many sensitive and pressing issues. The parent-hood decision is one of these issues. Lectures, textbooks, and documentary films often seem to be cold and remote. *Tomorrow's Families* may show that the soap opera effectively communicates these important issues to secondary school students.



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