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## Getting to Know the EMMA girls

'I never thought I'd be a mum at 16'

'I didn't picture myself being a young mum'

Life! It doesn't always come in a nice, planned out package. Many of us have experienced its unpredictability and wondered where it is all heading. When this happens the lucky ones have people around who can love and support them through it. But for some, either the support is not there or the event is just too big to deal with. It can seem like life has stopped and dreams have died.

Thanks to the EMMA program the dreams are not destroyed – just on hold. For girls aged 15-21yrs who find themselves pregnant, trying to find the support and encouragement to be great mothers and to continue towards their dream is hard.

'The stigma out there towards young mums is strong. I tried going to a local playgroup thinking I'd get support but all that happened was I got constantly told that I wouldn't be able to give my child a good future because of my age'

'Wherever you go you get stared at for being a young mum. I've had strangers come and touch my baby, checking out if she was healthy and looked after – total strangers!'

'It's incredibly hard. You feel like wearing a T-Shirt saying 'No, I didn't get pregnant for the money. No, I don't abuse my child. Yes, I do have a partner. Yes, he works.'

It's in talking with the EMMA girls that you realise the many stereotypes that are placed on young mums. It's also in talking with the girls that you start to understand their determination to break those stereotypes. Leah Houghton, Caseworker for the Emma Program and an older 'young mum' herself, talks proudly of the girls.

'There is no 'typical' Emma type girl. Half come from dysfunctional families and have little support or nurture and the other half come from loving nurturing family backgrounds. 80% of the girls are partnered. Out of those girls only one has a partner that doesn't work. The rest all work full time. All the girls desire to do a great job of mothering and are keen to be involved in extra support from organisations such as the Nambour Hospital. The girls also see the need for better education so EMMA partnered with Sunshine Coast TAFE to be able to offer the girls the chance to complete a Cert III in Business Administration in 2010. Two of the EMMA girls are currently completed their TPP (Tertiary Preparation Pathway with the University Of Sunshine Coast. It is just so easy for society to stereotype these girls as selfish young people who thought mothering was an easy way out, but for the Emma girls being a mother and young woman is so much more than that'.





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Part of the power of the program is the support the girls give each other.

'The Emma program gives me a place to learn to be a mum with others dealing with the same stuff of my age'

'The support and the understanding you get is great. Just having someone to go to, someone that doesn't judge – I really like that'

'When you get pregnant you lose a lot of your friends – they just don't understand. But you come here and talk about feeding, specials on nappies and food, relationship stuff, not being able to go to parties all the time, getting your figure back – it's good and fun!'

The Emma Program is more than just gaining education and knowledge, its role modelling and supporting. But mostly it's about providing the much needed unconditional love. "You've got to remember that these girls are teenagers first and then mums" states Leah "They have a basic need for unconditional love".

The Emma Program displays to the girls that being young and pregnant is not the end of the world nor their future. It's about showing how to begin a new dream which incorporates motherhood. And for anyone who spends time with the EMMA girls, it becomes obvious that that message is getting through.

