

Rosanna gave birth at just 14 ..because she wanted to follow in her mum's footsteps. But, like all young girls, she has lots to learn about life as a mother. Now she is a pupil at the..



EXCLUSIVE

By ANTONIA HOYLE

WHEN Rosanna set out to become a mum, she did so with startling success.

Within a week of dating her boyfriend the 14-year-old was pregnant.

Now, while most girls of her age are rifling the racks in Topshop or buying Sugababes CDs, Rosanna is spending her adolescence changing nappies and choosing Babygros.

But she doesn't mind that - or the fact that she never sees the father.

She is delighted with four-month-old Abie and thrilled that she is following in the footsteps of her mum, Kim, who's now a grandmother at 33 - having given birth to the first of her four kids at 15.

"I dropped out of school to bring up my children as a single mum," says Kim. "I wanted Rosanna to have a different future - to finish her education and make something of her life..."

That's why Kim has accompanied her daughter to The Meriton, in Bristol.

It is one of a handful of government-funded schools for teenage mums - and is featured in a series of C4 documentaries on underage sex hosted by Davina McCall this week.

Britain has the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Europe. One out of every 24 girls aged 15-17 are now mums-to-be.

In a bid to tackle the crisis, the government has spent almost £25million on projects such as The Meriton since 2002.

Only last week, it announced that a further £100,000 would be ploughed into educating pregnant young girls.

Yet many fear the initiative is actually encouraging underage sex and contributing to the shocking rise in teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

But head teacher Carol Bowery insists this simply isn't the case. "In addition to academic subjects, we teach the girls about both the physical and emotional implications of underage sex," she says.

"They have sex education three times a week. We try to bolster their confidence so they can respect themselves and, in the future, learn to say no if they don't feel ready."

Unfortunately, it's a lesson that has come too late for Rosanna.

"Being a mum's much more difficult than I realised," she admits in the school's creche.

"But I always wanted a baby and I love everything about Abie."

Kim has slowly warmed to the idea of Rosanna as a single young mum.

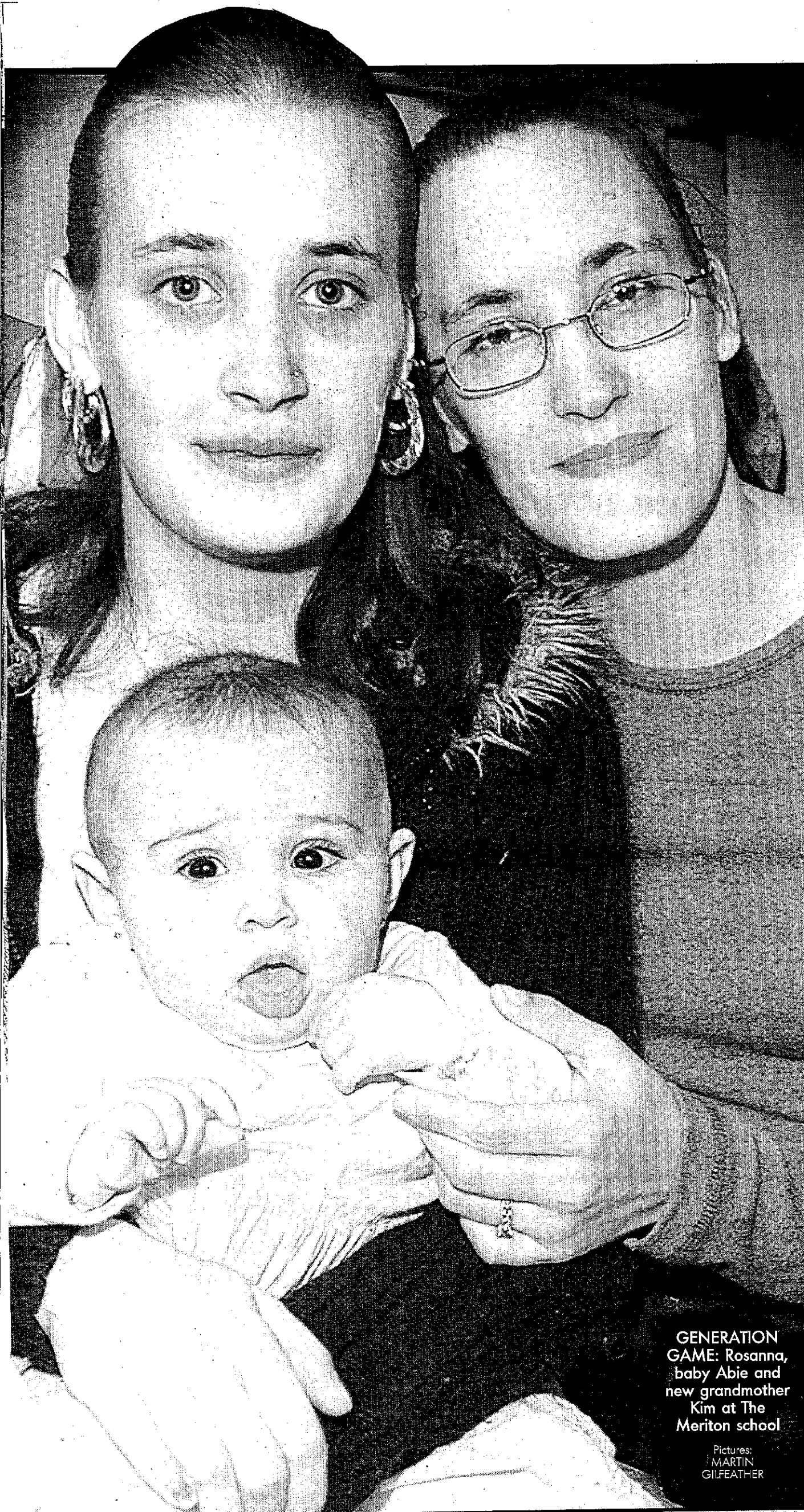
"She split up with her boyfriend before Abie was born," says Kim.

"He was an unsavoury, con-



RESPECT: Head teacher Carol

SCHOOL



GENERATION GAME: Rosanna, baby Abie and new grandmother Kim at The Meriton school

Pictures: MARTIN GILFEATHER

trolling character, so I'm glad she's single now. I want her to stay away from men and be happy as a single mum like me."

All 60 girls at The Meriton either have a baby or are pregnant. Some, such as 17-year-old Sharon, have more than one child.

She's studying for her AS level in Art at the school but admits that motherhood plays havoc with her homework.

"I was 14 when I got pregnant, with my son, Cadell," she explains. "My school said that it wasn't insured for pregnant girls, so I came to The Meriton."

"My old friends didn't want to know me - they'd rather be going out than looking after babies."

Sharon claims that she used a condom with her then-boyfriend but it split.

"At first, I was scared by being pregnant - especially as my boyfriend wasn't supportive," she admits. "It was an on-off relationship and, after it happened, I regretted having sex with him."

Incredibly, when their baby was six months old, Sharon had sex with him again... and became pregnant again.

"I was on the pill but got migraines, so I didn't take it as often as I should have."

Sharon's man wasn't able to attend the birth of their second daughter Kachaya, now nine months old.

He now has a new girlfriend but Sharon insists that becoming a mum has still changed her life for the better. "Before, I was bunking off school and getting into trouble."

"Now I'm more responsible. I want to do well here so I can be a fashion designer."

Estheeanna, 16, arrived at The Meriton two months after Sharon, and is now her best friend.

She's raising her two-year-old daughter Shannon at her foster parents' house - and readily admits she wasn't intending to be a mum.

SHE even had her own shocking form of contraception: "I'd had two miscarriages before," she explains.

"So when I got pregnant the third time, I figured I'd just miscarry again. Besides, I didn't want to use condoms. Sex is better without."

Estheeanna says, seemingly without sadness, that her boyfriend left her after Shannon was born. He now sees his daughter once a week but is demanding that she have a DNA test to prove she's actually his.

"I have slept with other boys but not at the time I got pregnant," explains Estheeanna. "He just doesn't trust me."

It hasn't put her off though. Like

Sharon, Estheeanna be motherhood has changed her the better. "I don't regret being a young mum. In fact, I want another baby when I'm 17," she says.

Of course, pregnancy isn't the peril of underage sex. STDs are increasing at an alarming rate. One in 10 teenage girls has chlamydia and syphilis has increased by 1,500 per cent.

ALTHOUGH posters advising "Free condom time" are plastered on the walls of The Meriton, Sharon and Estheeanna use another method themselves being infected.

"We get any bloke we sle to have a test for STDs before we have sex," says Estheeanna.

Worryingly, the pair are the oldest mums at The Meriton. A sewing class next door is for 14 and 15-year-olds who expect to have their first baby.

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But wh... these gir... to be p... when the... be en... teenage l...

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Back... creche, 16... Kelly is... with her... baby boy... She gave...

eight months ago and, like

The Meriton, is a single mum. She didn't plan to become a parent but explains: "The education I got at my old school was a video on periods. Luckily, my parents are supportive and getting used to changing nappies now - although waking up at night is still hard."

"The best thing about being a mum is the way Charlie smiles when he sees me. I love everything about him."

She does, however, regret being a parent so young. "I have been a good idea to go to school first," she confesses.

It's just a shame that Kelly and the thousands of other teenagers in Britain, didn't realise that they had become parents.

● Let's Talk Sex, today and tomorrow, 10.20am, C4.

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SUPPORTIVE: Estheeanna and Sharon



REGRETS: Kelly and Charlie

FOR TEEN MUMS