

LA INDEPENDENT - MARCH 2005

Teens Learn About Life Through Toddlers

By ROSANNA MAH, The Independent Staff Writer

Sixteen-year-old Luis Suarez joined the Teens and Toddlers program in Hollywood thinking it was going to be a breeze taking care of a group of toddlers.

But he was in for a shock when faced with toddlers asking him incessant questions, making plenty of demands on his time as well as crying when they got into fights with other children.

However, Suarez says that baby-sitting a group of toddlers was a definite eye-opener, giving him valuable insight into the trials and joys of parenting.

"It is a good program," said Suarez, a Hollywood Community Day School student whose nose was at that moment being pinched by another toddler. "I've learned how to communicate with little kids, how to deal with them, like when they start crying or when they do something wrong."

The main goal of the 14-week program, which came to Hollywood in January and pairs 15- to 16-year-olds with toddlers and pre-kindergarten children from a local nursery, is to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy, says Dianne McCutchan, executive director of Children: Our Ultimate Investment which sponsors the program.

"We have the highest teen pregnancy rates in all highly industrialized nations," said McCutchan. "It's because we do not empower our youth with honest, factual information about how to protect their reproductive health or how to make responsible decisions about their emerging sexuality."

In the United States, birth rates for young adolescents from age 10 to 14 have continued to decline since 1991 and reached an all-time low in 2002, reports the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The overall birth rate for teens aged 15 to 19 dropped 23 percent since 1994, according to the report.

The Hollywood-based nonprofit, founded by Laura Huxley, wife of novelist Aldous Huxley, is aimed at exposing youth, thought to be at high risk of teen pregnancy, to the reality of parenthood.

Besides one-on-one time with toddlers, students also talk about their views on relationships, parenting and sexuality during separate weekly discussions.

Many students who participate in the program say they are being exposed to some of the difficulties of parenthood, where responsibility serves as a large part of the learning curve — something that is still lacking in a majority of sexually-active teens.

The culture of teen sex is not a big deal among students in most high schools, according to 16-year-old Timothy Hammonds.

"I know a lot of kids who were not ready to have sex but they would choose to because someone would end up talking them into it," Hammonds said.

Sometimes, the teens may engage in unprotected sex which could result in unwanted pregnancies, the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, including chlamydia and syphilis which have been on the rise in recent years.

Despite the success of the program, studies have shown that parental guidance and communication is the most effective way of reducing teen pregnancies, said McCutchan.

"It is important that parents talk to their kids about sex," she said. "I see the kids are hungry for more information and adult guidance, and research shows the single most important thing that can be done to reduce teen pregnancy is to have adults, especially parents, offer their values around protecting their health and not getting pregnant."

For more information about Teens & Toddlers, please visit www.children-ourinvestment.org,

www.teensandtoddlers.org, or call (323)461-8248 .