

BEING A PARENT IS NOT A GAME

LA OPINION

January 20, 1999

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"Teens & Toddlers" teaches students the responsibility behind getting pregnant and having a child.

Eduardo lift his empty glass. "I want more milk," he asks.

Brian points a finger to a plate of chicken nuggets. "I want one," he demands

Jose wishes someone would open his bag of baby carrots; he thinks about biting into one and tasting it.

Seventeen-year-old Yadira Valencia knows that her duty is to tend to the needs of each one of the six little mouths that surround the table. Like eleven other students from Pueblo High School, she is learning through the Teens & Toddlers program the commitment that having a child signifies. She comes Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays to the Gates Community Children's Center, where from 10:30 and to 12:00 noon she feeds, entertains, and instructs six children, ages 2, 3, and 4. The goal is for her to experience first hand how demanding and self-centered children can be, so that she may ask herself: "Do I really want to get pregnant at my age? Am I really ready to have a child?"

But even if Yadira wanted to she could no longer answer these questions because three years ago she gave birth to Monique.

Yadira is in the program because she wishes to learn how to become a better mother. She says, "I don't regret having my daughter, but if I had known about this program before, who knows, I may have thought about it more." She says, "For me it was like growing up from one day to the next."

The father, twenty-year-old Francisco, lives with them. He works in an auto part junkyard. Yadira wants to finish high school and study for a career in veterinary care. One of the things Yadira has learned in this program is to treat her daughter better and nourish her well. Another has been to value her mother more. "Now I understand how difficult it is to have a child," says Yadira.

To seventeen-year-old Carol Bruno, the program has motivated her to make a decision: to wait until she has finished her career before having children. "I want to be an FBI agent," she says as she tries unsuccessfully to have four-year-old Kevin return the playdough he took without permission. "Yeah, I like kids, they're sweet, but they also demand a lot of attention, they depend on you for everything. Right now I don't feel ready for that. I'm too young. Look at this kid, he doesn't listen, he won't do what I ask."

It is precisely these types of decisions that Teens & Toddlers, begun in October of last year in two Los Angeles high schools, Temescal Canyon High and Pueblo de Los Angeles, tries to engrave into the minds of young people. Teens & Toddlers is sponsored by Children: Our Ultimate Investment, a non-profit organization founded in 1977 by the Italian violinist Laura Huxley, who is also the author of *The Child of Your Dreams*.

"In Actuality, Teens & Toddlers has been running for four years in Sierra Central High School in Nevada City," explains Elizabeth Crawford, executive director of COUI. "At the national teen pregnancy rate, you could expect that approximately 10% of the students would become pregnant, but guess what? None of our 120 graduates have reported becoming pregnant. This means one thing: it works. This is why we decided to bring it to Los Angeles."

The director of Gates Community Children's Center, Susan Ohde Burlando, says she supported the program for one reason: "I believe in it. I know it will work."

By February 5, when the course will end, Crawford and Huxley plan to have an information package where they will present in detail the success of Teens & Toddlers. Their district that have a high rate of teenage pregnancy that the program has positive results and they should incorporate it into their academic curriculum.

"We do it for the young people; we want them to understand how important it is to give birth to a child, because being a parent is not a game," says Huxley. "We are talking about children having children. Our program in no way wishes to criticize those who are already parents, we hold a deep respect for them. Rather we wish to help young people make a mature decision which will reflect on the well-being of the newborn, and on the whole family and therefore reflect on our society."

A decision that Teens & Toddlers hopes to achieve by first having students between the ages of 16 and 18 elect the class, which is limited to 12 students. "Although we have just begun, we had more students register than we could take in," says Crawford. The students are then divided into two groups of six and each group is assigned to a daycare center close to the school. There, each teenager is responsible for four to six toddlers. "Our hope is that experiencing how demanding the toddlers are, the students will realize how much time and space a child takes," explains Huxley. "In general, after two hours of being with the toddlers, the students declare themselves exhausted, completely exhausted."

Exhausted or not, they must return to class, where they learn about topics such as how a baby is conceived, how it develops, what type of nutrition and care the mother needs to follow, the role of the father, the labor, mother's milk, the care and education needed after the child is born.

"Teens & Toddlers is not a program specifically designed for the mother, it is designed for both parents, since both are involved in the creation of the child," says Huxley. "And of course we are pleased to say that half of our students are young men." One of them is 18 year-old Pascual Cova. "I signed up for the course because I like kids a lot," says Pascual after reading a story to a little girl. He admits, "But no way, I am definitely not prepared to have a child right now. It is not easy being a dad. Here I have learned that and much more."