

Cry baby gives teens glimpse of parenting

By CHERY SABOL
The Daily Inter Lake

How do you impress on a teen-ager the awesome responsibility of caring for an infant?

How about telling her what it's like and then handing her a relentlessly screaming "baby"?

The Nurturing Center plans a double-punch approach that includes firsthand accounts about the burdens of teen parenthood from those who have been there, plus a simulation of what it is like to be responsible for a baby.

The Nurturing Center will introduce its Dollar-A-Day participants to local high-school students who may have starry-eyed ideas about motherhood at a young age.

Reality will come from the lips of the group members, who became mothers at ages 15-19, and from screaming electronic dolls that mimic the relentless demands of babies.

The Dollar-A-Day program offers young mothers \$1 for each day they don't get pregnant again. Its members, meeting weekly for about a year, have a 90-percent success rate at not conceiving again. The program is funded by the Winter Classic Foundation.

Now the foundation has contributed a grant aimed at other teen-agers who could wind up as young parents, said Susan



Christofferson of the Nurturing Center.

Her Dollar-a-Day members first will attend an eight-week leadership training program covering child development, personality characteristics, communications skills, conflict resolution, consensus building and group process.

They could then act as mentors of other young mothers at risk of a second pregnancy, school dropout or other consequences.

And the participants, with adult assis-

tance, will establish a presentation for junior high health classes.

"Life Options" will focus on the positive aspects of delaying sexual activity by highlighting the lives of the young speakers and the challenges they faced, not fully aware of the consequences of their actions before becoming pregnant," Christofferson wrote in the grant application.

To reinforce what the young parents say, students will have use of the "baby think it over" doll. It is a lifelike replica of an infant, programmed electronically to squall every two hours or so, requiring the "parent" to hold and feed it with a special device attached to the student's wrist. To quiet the doll, the student must hold it for up to 35 minutes.

If the "baby" is mishandled or left unattended to cry, warning lights are activated, signaling that the student has neglected the baby, which will affect his or her grade in class.

A few days of attending to the needs of the "baby," including sleep deprivation and the struggle of carrying diaper bags, strollers and car seats, can give a fairly realistic glimpse of motherhood, Christofferson said.

The dolls are being used nationwide in such classes, she said.

"It's another kind of innovative approach to what we all should be looking at," she said.