

Program provides young moms more than dollar a day

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Within the group of young women are aspiring pharmacists, veterinarians, cosmetologists and broadcast journalists. Some work; some are in high school; one is in college; some have their diploma equivalency. A couple of them are married.

Each one is a teen-ager and has a child.

When introduced, they describe their children in more detail than they describe themselves.

"He's talking; he says, 'Hi.'" "She's walking. She has her sixth tooth." "She did this crawling thing today."

The mothers gather once a week in the Dollar A Day program at the Nurturing Center, where they're paid \$1 for each day they don't get pregnant again.

They know it's a concept that some people viscerally oppose, but these women are already used to derision. They've lost friends because of their early pregnancies, and some feel their community writes them off before they reach adulthood.

"People acted like I was contagious," one said.

"This is a town that throws a lot of adolescents away," said Susan Christofferson of the Nurturing Center.

But the teen-agers in this group apparently won't go quietly. "This is an exceptional group of young women," she said.

The numbers vary from week to week, up to a dozen or so. They must attend the meetings to receive their \$7.

But it's not the nominal payment that keeps them coming to the one-hour meetings, they said. The group has turned into a quiet political body and a support group for other teen-agers in the same situation.

Angie brought in her diploma to show off last spring. The other mothers gave her a cheer, and she explains she comes to the meetings because, "I like the people in this group."

Together, they vent their frustrations at what they believe are public misconceptions about them.

With two exceptions — girls who said they planned and wanted to have babies — the members said it was ignorance, or innocence, that led to their pregnancies. That's not to say that they were unaware of the biology of how it happens.

They've seen the films in health class — "These are your reproductive organs, these are your reproductive organs..." said 18-year-old Jody Brooks.

What they said they never learned was how to say no when it mattered.

"If my parents had sat me down and talked candidly with me, I probably wouldn't be in the situation I'm in," one mother said.

"I felt like I couldn't say no. I didn't know how. I was also curious," said the mother of a 10-month-old girl.

Some said they were drunk when they got pregnant. Another said she knew about birth control, but "he preferred not to use it... Now I don't have him any more."

Little girls should learn about self-respect, they said, and that education should start, either in home or at school, by sixth grade.

They want to teach others from their experience. They're concerned about the number of pregnant girls at the high school this

year, and invited them to a reception at one of their meetings. Maybe they can tell expectant mothers what problems to expect.

Even more, they want to prevent teen-agers from getting pregnant in the first place. They imagine the kind of health class that would have made a difference for them: Discussion would be frank, and it would be coeducational for the most part. They talk about coming up with their own curriculum and making presentations in the schools.

Within the freedom of the Dollar a Day program, their discussion frequently derails that way, then jumps to another track of recollections of teen-age adventures and troubles, in the abbreviated adolescence before their world was ruled by their children.

They don't have time for the kind of partying some enjoyed before, they said.

After work or school, "it's at home, and you're staying there for the night," they said. They spend their time playing with their kids, going to the park or a movie, having friends over or taking a walk or a drive.

A few said parenthood stripped them of desire for the wild life that used to define them. Some were headed toward self-destruction before their children were born, Christofferson said.

"What they did is create their own survival," she said.

"If it weren't for China (her daughter), I wouldn't be here," said Cherish Walter. Knowing that someone needs her has kept her responsible, she said.

"When it was just me, I didn't care," another woman said. "Now I have more goals."

Angie's 3-year-old son was "the biggest motivation helping me graduate," she said.

Three of the seven mothers at a recent meeting said they have received Aid to Families with Dependent Children for a few months.

"I don't think we have any career AFDC recipients in this room," Christofferson said.

"There are some of us who are truly, completely embarrassed to use their system," one teen-ager said.

Several mothers said they resent the assumption that they want a handout. What they want, Walter said, is to prove themselves, but there seem to be stumbling blocks everywhere.

Housing is expensive and hard to find for a teen-ager with a baby and few job skills; better-paying jobs are hard to come by for a 17-year-old girl with the limited schedule that child care dictates.

"Give us a chance to give the best we can for our kids," one mother said. "We're part of this world, too."

"Some of us care about our kids," Brooks said.

These are children who may need more care than others. Even without any other factor, the children are statistically at risk of becoming teen parents themselves, Christofferson said. Of the seven girls, three were children of teen mothers.

The mothers don't think they'll regret or resent their early parenthood when they're older.

"You look at it differently when you have your own," Walter said.

Her only resentment will come from a community that she fears may punish her forever for keeping her baby.

"Give us a chance," she said. "You should think of us, too."