

Inter Lake editorial

Dollar value

One experience young teen-agers ought to be spared is parenthood.

Probably no one is ever quite prepared for the complications, along with the joy, that accompany a baby. But the record is clear that young teen-agers are not up to the task of parenting. A baby's birth should signal only the beginning of childhood, not the end of the mother's, which is certainly the case when young girls give birth.

The Nurturing Center here in Kalispell, a private, non-profit family-help agency, is trying to do something about the problem of children bearing children.

A week ago, the center announced it would pay girls not to get pregnant. The program accepts only girls at least 15 years old who have already had one pregnancy. They would be paid a dollar for each day they don't get pregnant again. The program will accept up to 12 girls and has enough money to last six months.

Despite the obvious good intentions, there is something disturbing about the plan.

A center spokeswoman says girls who are candidates for the dollar a day already have been pregnant at least once and know how to prevent getting pregnant again. The dollar

a day reward, presumably, will encourage them to take precautions.

For a moment, overlook the ethical conflicts of bribing children to do what's right. Doesn't paying teen-age girls and not boys reinforce the old double standard that young men have less responsibility for their sexual behavior than young women do? And as a practical matter, is a dollar a day enough incentive when the welfare system pays substantially more to single mothers to keep bearing children?

The real flaw in this well intended program is that it apparently is offered in a moral vacuum, absent any value system which these immature girls and boys so obviously need. The girls have been pregnant, or they would not be in the program, and they evidently don't see any reason not to get pregnant again.

A dollar a day won't keep kids on the right track. Petty cash is no substitute for a value system that helps teens know right from wrong. It won't prepare them for becoming parents or responsible adults. It may delay the inevitable, but it seems just as likely to perpetuate the flawed values that are a major cause of the problem we are trying to fix.