

1995

Kalispell experiment a year later: Did \$1 a day keep the stork away?

Teen-age girls say moral support has been more important than cash

By CAROL BRADLEY
Tribune Staff Writer

KALISPELL — Joann Phillips, 18, a striking blonde, is recalling the worst time she has endured with her son, Dillon, who was conceived by accident in "a first date kind of thing."

"I was the happiest mother — up until he was two months old," Joann is saying.

And then one day a friend of hers announced that he was planning to go out and paint the town. There was no way Joann could join him. The baby was waiting.

"And I went home that night and I just lost it," she says. "And I thought 'Maybe I should just give him up for adoption.'"

For a solid month she had nothing to do with the baby. She was living at home; her mother fed and bathed the child instead.

And then, just as quickly, Joann snapped out of it, she says.

Moments after she tells this story, she walks next door to the Nurturing Center in Kalispell to retrieve Dillon. Outside she balances him on her hip while the other young mothers take turns cooing at him and tickling him under his chin and laughing with delight at the way his untamed yellow hair wafts like cotton candy in the chilly breeze.

"He's just a year today," Joann says, smiling down at her birthday boy.

As one small stab against the epidemic of teen-age pregnancy, The Nurturing Center, private, non-profit organization that offers programs for parents and children, decided to try an experiment: For

an entire year, it would pay teen-age mothers a dollar a day not to get pregnant again.

No major strings attached. Just cold cash, doled out in \$7 weekly increments. An outright bribe in return for responsible behavior.

In another few weeks the money will run out. Has the experiment worked?

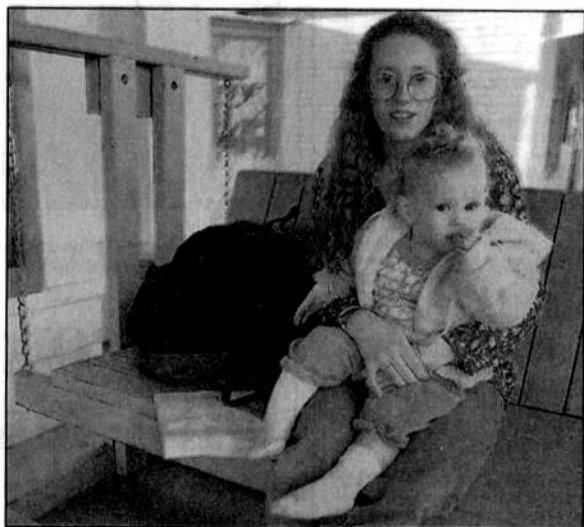
The Nurturing Center would say that it has.

Well, sort of.

Of the dozen young mothers who enrolled in the program, two dropped out. Three of the remaining 10 wound up pregnant again. Two of them suffered miscarriages. The third had an abortion.

So, okay, the track record isn't perfect, admits Susan Christofferson, the center's executive director. Without the program, she believes, it would

See PREGNANCY, 5A



Eric Hamner photo

Marissa Tilton helps get 15-month-old daughter Jasmine ready for the ride home in Kalispell. Marissa, 17, just moved into her own apartment. She has a part-time job but also qualifies for \$150 a month in food stamps.

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Great Falls Tribune 5A

Teens: Seeking support from the group

FROM 1A
have been worse.

Over peanut butter crackers and punch, Erin Heinzen, 18, is describing to the other mothers a conference she attended the previous Saturday, courtesy of The Nurturing Center.

"It was rad," she effuses, her face glowing, her hands waving about in the light streaming in from the late afternoon sun. They are pale, child-like hands. Most of the bright red polish on her nails has chipped away.

"We got to figure out what color personality you are: orange, gold, blue or green. I'm orange: I'm INTENSE!" Erin is saying.

"We figured out how to adapt to other people's colors. It was really cool. And then we had an awesome lunch."

Every Wednesday afternoon the mothers meet for an hour and a half, to pick up their checks and to talk about whatever. Mostly it's a time to unload, to commiserate about the burdens of rearing babies who never, ever give you a day off, who run through 30-40 costly diapers a week, who sometimes cry and cry and cry until you think they are never going to stop.

The Wednesday gathering "is more of a support group. We don't just talk about sex," says Shanna Blodgett, 20, the only married mom in the group.

"It gives you somebody to talk to," nods Tera Morris, 20, mother of 2½-year-old Tyler.

The problem of teen-age pregnancy has been exploding quietly in America for two decades. Now, suddenly, it's in the spotlight. Teen pregnancy is one reason we're becoming a fatherless society, experts tell us. It's where an entirely new generation of welfare sputters to a start.

Nationwide, an estimated 1 million teen-age girls become pregnant each year, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute. That's 12 percent of all girls between 15 and 19; a fifth of all teen-age girls who've had sexual intercourse.

Montana's percentage is slightly higher. The number of teen pregnancies in this state actually dropped by nearly a third from 1980 to 1992, from 2,786 to 1,973, according to



Eric Hamner photo

Joann Phillips, 18, says she had a lot of adjusting to do after she had her son, Dillon, now 2. She considered giving him up for adoption, but is glad now she didn't.

state officials. Even so, of the 13,959 pregnancies recorded in Montana in 1992, 14 percent were to teen-agers.

A third of their pregnancies ended in abortion or miscarriage. Two thirds of the rest were born to mothers aged 18 or 19, who are legally considered adults.

Another 400 babies a year were born to high school-age girls. Still another dozen babies made mothers out of girls who were younger than 15.

The obvious question: Why would a young girl already experiencing the trials and tribulations of motherhood have to be paid a penny, much less a dollar a day, to avoid another pregnancy?

The Nurturing Center program, incidentally, is privately funded; no taxpayer dollars are involved. For

every year a teen-age mother goes without having a second child, "we save (Aid to Families with Dependent Children and Medicaid," Christofferson rationalizes.

But, anyway, the dollar a day was a gimmick, she now concedes, a form of bait hoisted out to reel the girls in. The mothers echo her claim: The money didn't matter. It's the weekly talks that have made a difference. In fact, they plan to continue meeting even after the money runs out.

Still, ask them how they're spent the proceeds and a wall of defensiveness, invisible but palpable, rises.

"Diapers," one girl blurts out. "Clothes."

"A roof over your head!" That's 19-year-old Jody Brooks talking. The mother of 15-month-old

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— Susan Christofferson
executive director of The Nurturing Center

Mattisha, she qualifies for \$332 a month in welfare. Maybe it was supposed to be a gimmick, but the dollar a day helps.

"You have to buy so much it's unreal," Jody mutters darkly. "You're lucky if you get a pair of underwear out of the deal."

Don't get her wrong: Babies can be a blast. Motherhood is "not as bad as it's portrayed," she insists.

But, like almost all of the girls here, Jody considers herself an accidental mom.

Before, "I thought 'I'm never having kids. I'm never getting married. I'm going to be an old spinster woman,'" she recalls.

Erin, mother of 2 1/2-year-old Daphne, felt the same way. "I was going to graduate and I was going to join the Navy," she says matter of facty. "When I was 35, I was going to have a baby."

She pauses for effect. "And then things changed."

Her story sounds familiar. The mothers seated around her laugh.

Community reaction to the dollar-a-day program has been guarded at best. In an editorial last March Kalispell's newspaper, The Daily Inter Lake, said it found "something disturbing" about the concept.

"It apparently is offered in a moral vacuum, absent any value system which these immature girls and boys so obviously need," the newspaper chided.

Christofferson was stung by the criticism.

"What we're offering is support," she says. "This is not about making

judgments — good, bad or indifferent." Each week, she says, the girls "come a little bit closer to becoming more mature, less damaged and more likely to become successful."

The problem of teen pregnancy isn't abating, agrees Cathy McDevitt, principal of Flathead High School in Kalispell.

"I think our community is a reflection of the whole society," she says. "We do have more than our share of students who get pregnant and do have a baby during their high school years, and there are students who don't come here who we're aware of in the community, who aren't enrolled in any schooling at all."

Out of a student body of 1,600, Flathead High has four pregnant students enrolled in classes, McDevitt says. Ten more have already had babies this year.

The girls — they are women, really — can quickly tick off the lessons they've learned.

- When a boyfriend pledges eternal devotion, take it with a major grain of salt.
- Sex education is badly needed. "They need to teach you how to put on a condom," Shanna says.
- If a pharmacist tries to bully you out of buying condoms, don't back down. ("My sister tried to buy a box of condoms and they carded her," Erin protests.) There's no law forbidding the sale of condoms to teens.
- Think hard before you have a baby. "I'd say, 'Take my kid for a couple of days and see what it's like,'" Shanna suggests.
- Once you've had a baby, switch to dark clothes. "Two days after Daphne was born," Erin says, "I bought white jeans and white silk shirt — and blllaaiihh." She mimics the sound of a baby snitting up.

Crying dolls offer fine simulation of babies

By Tribune staff

Put away the flour babies. If you really want to give high schoolers an inkling of what life with a baby is like, give them a Baby Think it Over doll instead.

Far more futuristic — and no doubt lighter — than their flour-filled predecessors, Think it Over dolls are programmed to cry at regular intervals, including the wee hours. (Don't hurt to add a little sleep deprivation to the mix.)

The only way to stop the wailing is to insert a special key into the doll.

If a student has left Baby Think it Over too far away to hear the crying and fails to stop it, a light flashes on in an instructor's house — proof that the pretend baby is being neglected.

"They're pretty fancy," said Susan Christofferson, executive director of The Nurturing Center in Kalispell.

The private, non-profit organization has ordered five Baby Think it Over dolls: two white male, two white female and one dark-skinned doll it hopes will pass for a Native American.

They'll be used in conjunction with public talks a group of teen-agemothers taking part in a Nurturing Center program hope to start making sense to point out the realities of teen-age parenthood.

The Nurturing Centers the first and only in Montana to order the dolls, Christofferson said.

"We were the last to state the U.S. to inquire about them," she added wryly.

