

Project FIT Focuses on Latino Teen Pregnancy

By Tracy Nelson

“The younger siblings of teen parents are two to six times more likely to become pregnant as teens than younger siblings of teens who are not parents,” according to an article from The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

It’s because of statistics like this that Tricia East and Barbara Reyes created Project FIT (Families in Transition), a branch-off program of Project Younger Sibling, which started in the early 1990s.

“We knew [the younger siblings] were at risk,” said East, the Principal Investigator. “It’s a clinically recognized phenomenon.”

Project FIT, funded by the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, focuses on the younger siblings, ages 11-16, of teen mothers in Latino families and examines the reasons behind future pregnancies. The research study looks at a number of different aspects: the younger sibling’s involvement in baby care, the family dynamics and problem solving skills within the family. These aspects concentrate on the “family’s transition from pregnant to parenting,” according to East.

She and Reyes look at all of these observations, hopeful that they will lead to some understanding as to why the younger siblings of teen mothers, especially in Latino families, are more likely to become pregnant in their teens.

Studies have been done in the past that focus on African Americans and whites as well as Latinos. Project FIT chose to concentrate on Latinos because “the urgency to

study Mexican Americans stayed the same when others decreased,” said Reyes, Project Coordinator.

The missing research, however, is what happens right after the baby is born and what changes in the family dynamics. This is the reason for observing the families on four separate occasions: six weeks before the birth, six weeks, six months and one year after the birth. East and Reyes are currently working almost 100 families.

But finding the families was not an easy task. They must meet a specific list of requirements:

- The teen must be pregnant for the first time,
- She must be the first sibling to become pregnant,
- She must be unmarried,
- Her mother must live near or with her
- The sibling must be more than 11 years of age but younger than the pregnant teen.

“We hunted everywhere,” said Reyes, who spent countless hours searching for any programs that dealt with teens who might be eager to participate in the study. They found willing participants through the Adolescent Family Life Program in El Centro, Santa Ana and Riverside and through the San Diego Adolescent Parenting Program. In addition, Project FIT recruits families from Los Angeles, Imperial and Orange County and many more facilities. They also contacted four Planned Parenthood locations in San Diego and three different charter schools for pregnant teens. The staff includes three field workers, two who are college students and one who is fulltime. The workers outreach to the different sites and visit the family’s homes.

“They want to serve their teens and they let us come in and talk in the classrooms,” said East about the charter school’s interest in the study.

Finding participants is just one of Reyes’ many responsibilities.

“I keep [East] from getting headaches,” said Reyes, who’s in charge of the overall management of the study.

East, on the other hand, takes care of analyzing the study’s data on the computer and writing the result for research articles.

The families receive a stipend for participating and meeting with one of the interviewers from Project FIT to answer questions for the study. There are three questionnaires to be answered at one sitting.

Through studying the whole family together instead of taking the younger siblings aside, East and Reyes can see them in their most comfortable environment and therefore see the truest effects of the older sibling’s pregnancy.

“We have a lot of really vocal siblings,” said Reyes. “They are wonderful families and willing to participate.”

East and Reyes described some protective factors for avoiding teen pregnancy:

- high self esteem
- optimistic educational goals
- maturity and resistance skills
- supportive and involved parenting

Teenage pregnancy prevention programs that are aimed at the younger siblings of the pregnant or parenting teen are expanding beyond San Diego and California. They

extend across the United States, from Oregon to New York City to South Carolina to Boston to Washington D.C. and Project FIT is proud to be among them.

“It has spread,” said East. “It’s really neat to see how it can blossom into real prevention. [Teen pregnancy] continues to be a problem and that’s why it should be addressed.”

To learn more about Project FIT you can contact this toll free number (866) 543-3614, or visit the website at www.medicine.ucsd.edu/projectfit

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