

Time to talk about sex in the South Bronx

April 22, 2011

By Sana T. Gulzar

It is 4 p.m. in M.S. 218 in the South Bronx and it is time to play Pregnancy Jeopardy. The board in front lists six categories of questions—Myth and Facts, Pregnancy, Conception, Fetal Development, Genetics and Terminology and Definition. Two five-student teams of 7th graders—the Lions and the Tigers—are battling out their knowledge about everything from conception to birth.

High school senior, Audrey Pichardo draws to explain fetal development to middle school students.



Under the category, “Terms and Definitions,” the questioner asks, “What is the term that describes the ability to get pregnant?” One curly-haired 7th grade boy yells, “Sexual intercourse.” The others giggle. The answer is incorrect! “It is called being fertile,” replies one girl from the opposing team.

This is an after-school weekly sex education workshop held in the spring semester for middle school students as part of the “Just Ask Me”

(JAM) program organized by WHEDco, a Bronx non-profit women’s development group. It’s been a worthwhile mission. According to New York’s summary of vital statistics released in December 2010, the Bronx has the highest rate of teen pregnancy in the city—11.6 percent of live births.

One thing sets this middle school class apart: the educators are high school seniors, who founded the program to teach sex education and reproductive health to middle school students.

JAM started six years ago by a group of 7th grade girls who decided that talking about sex is the only way to combat teen pregnancy in their neighborhood.

“When they saw a lot of kids leaving high school and coming back to the community pregnant,” said Nicole Jennings, head of the sex-ed program at WHEDco, “they were really concerned about it themselves as well as why it was happening,”

High school seniors now, the original group of girls from M.S. 218, having been trained by WHEDco now teaches the sex-ed classes at the middle school. They blame the high rate of teen pregnancy to the lack of sex education, especially in middle school when kids first start exploring their sexuality.

“It’s the age that they get curious about sex life and they want to do all these kind of things but they don’t know how to stay protected,” said Dylan Serrano, 17, one of the peer educators. “If they have information they would know what they are doing right and what they are doing wrong.”

While sex education takes place in New York’s high schools, it’s too late by then, Serrano argues. Most middle school students do not get any information at home either. Peer educators believe that parents are reluctant to talk to their children about sex, contraception and pregnancy and would much rather have the school give out that information to them.

“A lot of parents are close minded and they feel that you’ll learn everything at school,” said Yanisla Frias, 17, who adds that parents seem to worry that the information might encourage their teenagers to have sex. “They are afraid that if we are going to teach them then they are going to do it.”

This problem is especially pertinent within the Bronx, as there are a large number of immigrants in the borough. Many parents from different cultural backgrounds do not realize the challenges teens face with respect to their sexuality and the external factors influencing them, say educators.

“There is a lot of cultural diversity here and with that come a lot of customs about talking to your kids about certain things or not talking to your kids about certain things,” said Rachel Mendelson, JAM program coordinator.

Mendleson points out that a family’s income level also plays a role. “If you are a single mother working and 2 or 3 jobs, you are not really around and your kids are free to get information elsewhere or just free time to have sex,” she said.

17-year-old Emily Godoy plays Pregnancy Jeopardy with middle schoolers. Teen pregnancy rates in the United States are twice as high as those in Canada or England. , Emily Godoy, a 17-year-old peer educator believes that the numbers are much lower in Europe because schools and parents there talk to the teens about it and discuss the options. Here, she argues, the focus is on abstinence.



“When you tell somebody not to do something, they are going to do it,” said Godoy. Coordinator Mendelson says that with no information at home, no formal education at school and misinformation from T.V. and their peers, American teenagers do not know how to protect themselves and end up getting pregnant.

During the course of the workshop, the peer educators showed the class clips from two popular reality t.v. shows—*Teen Mom* and *16 and Pregnant*. These shows viewed by a large number of teenagers primarily track the lives of teen moms trying to cope with being a parent. The JAM educators said that such programs further misinform kids.

Audrey Pichardo, 14, believes that while these shows do depict the struggles of teenage pregnancy, they also in a way glorify it.

“Without the information, when kids see these shows, they get confused,” said Pichardo. “And they are like, ‘Is it a bad thing or is it a good thing?’”

For all of these reasons, this group of high school students has taken matters in its own hands. They believe that sex education and human sexuality should be treated as any other academic subject, even for middle schoolers And until that happens they will do it themselves.

“I know that I am going to talk to my kids about it. Because I know what it felt like when I was in 5th grade or 6th grade,” said 18-year-old Frias. Even if it means for now, just playing another round of *Pregnancy Jeopardy*.