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Taking Part/Dads' Involvement with Kids on the Rise

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EVERY morning at 8, Albert Hopkins drops off his 5-year-old son Prentiss at a child development center in the Fifth Ward. He gives him a goodbye hug, adjusts the boy's clothes one last time and heads to his job at a convenience store.

He returns again at 3 p.m., like clockwork, to pick up Prentiss at the Community Partners center at Lyons and Gregg. When he has a second job in the afternoon, Hopkins takes his son along. At 26, Hopkins is a single father who has been raising his son for a year.

Hopkins is part of a trend: Increasing numbers of young fathers are becoming more involved in their children's daily lives.

Local experts hope to help the trend expand. Through a number of programs - Community Partners, March of Dimes Baby Buddy and the Macho Project - they are getting young fathers involved in the problems of teen pregnancy and parenthood.

For too long, they say, the focus of prevention and parenting programs has been on teen-age girls. In communities where fathers are needed the most, they are often absent from the scene, said Pat Strobel, a Community Partners board member. Many teen-age mothers drop out of school and live in poverty, unable to support their children on one income or the money they get from Aid to Families With Dependent Children.

"Our position is 'Say No to Sex,' but you've got to face reality," said Ernest McMillan, coordinator of Community Partners' Fifth Ward Enrichment Program, which works with boys age 11 to 16.

"We urge the boys to stay in school, to postpone being a parent and reinforce that with life skills. But we also tell them to live up to their responsibilities emotionally and financially if their girlfriends get pregnant. That baby needs them, too. I think the mind-set of girls carrying the burden is really changing," McMillan said.

McMillan's program started in 1984, when he and Donna Bryant, director of Community Partners, began a pilot after-school program with 11-year-old boys in sixth grade. They

picked that age as the best time to offer enrichment programs for boys at high risk for dropping-out and teen parenthood.

Community Partners, operated by the Urban Affairs Corporation, is a non-profit organization that has been providing health and human services to the Fifth Ward for more than 18 years. It is federally and privately funded.

When McMillan's program began, the school-based clinic operated by Community Partners at the H.P. Carter Career Center on Lyons Avenue was serving 90 girls to and 10 boys. With free medical care offered at 10 area schools, Bryant said it was much easier to get the girls into the clinic. Once there, courses in family planning and sexuality were offered, along with medical help.

McMillan's program and a sports medicine plan were envisioned as ways to get male teens into the clinic, Bryant said. In some ways, it has worked. Last year's statistics showed that clinic services were offered almost equally to male and female teens. But Bryant and her staff began noticing other problems.

"It was like we were working on a crisis mentality. We would offer family planning, but by the time the girls came in, they were pregnant," Bryant said. "Now that our services have evened out a little, we've started stressing the importance of dads. We're going to begin to do that in the child-care center, where most of the dropping off and picking up is done by the young moms.' Hopkins is one of several dads who drop off or pick up their children. The majority are shuttled back and forth by their teen-age moms. Hopkins' son came to the child development center when he was 8 months old and has been cared for at the clinic ever since. The staff is careful to give Hopkins special praise and support for his involvement.

"I love my son," said Hopkins. "I love him like I had him with my own body.' In September, the Community Partners clinic began offering a new parenting program for young moms and pregnant teens, stressing dads' involvement. Priscilla Auzenne, Community Programs social service coordinator, has managed to get two fathers involved in the nine-month course.

"Many of the girls are abandoned by the young men. Some would be parents if they could, but often the girls get mad at them because they can't help with financial support," Auzenne said. "Then when some of them come back and try to be dads the girls say: 'I don't need you. My Mom raised me, and I can raise this baby myself.' I tell them that it may be impractical to expect financial support from teens, but they can at least be involved emotionally.' Auzenne urges them not to shut the boys out of their babies' lives.

Lahoma Bernard, 18, is one young mother who listened. When Bernard's pregnancy was diagnosed, she called her boyfriend Eddie Miller, 20, and insisted he come to the Community Partners clinic. Since then he has accompanied her on prenatal visits and to the parenting program.

"At first Eddie wondered why he needed to come to my clinic visits. But he asked to come to the parenting program. He wanted to participate," Bernard said. "I want him to be involved as much as possible. Even if we break up, I want him to be involved with the child. He says he'll be in the delivery room with me. I would just feel more secure. He's been with me this far; I'd fall apart if he left now." When Dr. Bobbie Henderson began working with pregnant teens in 1983, her Infant/Child/Parent Development Project focused largely on teen-age girls. The project, funded by United Way and a partnership between Neighborhood Centers and Texas Southern University, has been highly successful in preventing repeat pregnancies. Only 10 out of 1,500 girls who have taken part in the seven-year program have had second pregnancies. Henderson is including males in the project now.

"We've decided to look at the other side. My regular program has a male component - a group of young men that goes out to talk about contraception," she said. "But we needed more than that. Concentrating on the girls alone was becoming a burnout and a vicious cycle. Maybe it was just part of society to tell the girls to say 'no.' This is a different perspective." In January, Henderson began The Macho Project at Wheatley Senior High School, funded by the Texas Commission on Drug and Alcohol Abuse, headed by Craig Adams. The project emphasizes maintaining the macho image with dignity, Henderson said. The boys are told:

Don't get a girl pregnant to help your own ego.

If you do impregnate your girlfriend, act responsibly to the girl, society and your child.

If you're not now a father, but are sexually active, be sure both partners use contraception.

Fifty boys, from freshmen to seniors, are involved in the program as peer role models. They will participate in a teen conference on AIDS and pregnancy prevention sponsored by ICP on June 30.

Edwin Banks, 18, is eagerly awaiting the birth of his baby in July. He and his girlfriend, also 18, have participated in the March of Dimes Baby Buddy program since they found out she was pregnant last fall. Baby Buddy was started two years ago as a pilot program at the Lyons Avenue Health Clinic to improve prenatal care for Fifth Ward mothers. That area has the highest infant mortality rate in the city and the third highest number of low birth-weight babies.

The Baby Buddy program, supported by volunteer MOD fund-raising efforts, has spread to five other city clinics and deals with everyone from unmarried teens to older married women. Recently, the program has begun reaching out to fathers, distributing a list of ways they can participate more in the pregnancy.

"We started noticing that the pregnancies and the babies did better when the dads were there along with the mothers," said Lori Wiltz, March of Dimes Baby Buddy coordinator. "That's especially true with teen moms. For instance, her mother might be telling her not to eat junk food, but it often seems to have more effect coming from her teen partner.' Banks says he always planned to be involved with his girlfriend's pregnancy, but the Baby Buddy program has made a difference.

"I'm more aware of the importance of fatherhood, and they tell you what to expect during pregnancy," Banks said. "It inspired me to go to the doctor with her and help her eat better. I don't think I would have been involved to the extent I am now if it hadn't been for Baby Buddies.' Delvin Ross, 19, has been living with his girlfriend and helping raise their year-old son. He credits McMillan and the Fifth Ward Enrichment program for creating an awareness of his responsibilities. Ross dropped out of Prairie View A&M to help support his child and is working at Fiesta. McMillan is trying to help him finish his education at TSU.

McMillan says it is often much easier to work with teen fathers than it is with older men. Older men are likely to abandon their young girlfriends because theirs is less of a peer relationship.

Bryant and Wiltz have identified a new, alarming trend - 25 percent of the unmarried teen-age girls have had relationships with men who are in their late 20s and older. Wiltz recently encountered a 17-year-old who became pregnant by a 56-year-old man.

"I think people need to be more aware of statutory rape - that is what it is to have sex with a girl that age," said Wiltz. "It makes me really frightened for tomorrow's children.' David Benson, an aide to Harris County Commissioner El Franco Lee, recently became aware of the problem with older men. He hopes to put together an advisory council to address that and other issues. Benson believes increasing the programs for teen males and approaching the issue of teen pregnancy "holistically" will at least begin to address the problem.

In the meantime, the numbers of involved teen fathers are still small but increasing.

"Some of my friends think it's weird that I'm taking care of Prentiss; others say it's cool," said Hopkins. "As long as a father wants to take part in a baby's life, the mother should let him - as long as he's not setting a bad example. If they have jobs and won't help out, then forget it. If the father doesn't have a job, she should keep pushing him to get one but continue to let him see the baby.'