

Wheeler: Help where and when it counts

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The hurt, the pain, the yearning for connection - Randi Rubenstein has seen all the ways ill-equipped parents can damage children.

A foster mother 10 times, Rubenstein eventually became haunted by the numbers of children - 500,000 in the U.S. foster care system at any one time - aching for love.

"There wasn't enough room in my house for all of those children," says Rubenstein, who holds a master's degree in public health. But instead of feeling helpless, Rubenstein felt empowered.

She decided the way to keep hurt children from becoming the teenagers who birth the next generation of hurt children was to teach them about healthy relationships, finances and parenting - before they became parents.

In 2005, Rubenstein quit her job in technology education and founded a nonprofit, Education for Successful Parenting. When a souring economy brought hard times, she sold her California home and used the equity to keep ESP going.

In August, she moved to Raleigh with her 10th foster child, 14-year-old Lurae, whom she adopted at age 4. Rubenstein chose Raleigh for many reasons: its sense of community, its universities with researchers who could measure her program's success, its educated workforce from which she hopes to draw ESP instructors.

This semester, Rubenstein is giving workshops at Millbrook High School. Through the extensive ESP curriculum she developed, teens learn how to set life priorities, explore reasons for having children, set goals for future children, and

Education for Successful Parenting

ESP is a nonprofit organization that teaches teens about parenting responsibilities before they form families. Learn more about how to help or volunteer at ESP at eduparents.org.

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Randi Rubenstein has cared for 10 foster children, including Lurae, now 14. Rubenstein's nonprofit, Education for Successful Parenting, aims to equip teens to be good parents before they start having children.

determine the costs of providing for those children.

"We think of parenting as nurturing, when the most important thing is to provide for and protect children," Rubenstein says. "When that doesn't happen, that's how they end up in the foster care system."

'A child's perspective'

In the curriculum's workbooks, students write down things they appreciated from their own childhoods and things they promised themselves they'd never do. "No matter your background, you've said, 'I'm never doing that to my child,' " Rubenstein says.

She helps students replace bad choices their parents made with healthy options.

"They may be uncomfortable because what we know feels comfortable," she says. "If a girl grew up with no father, and a boy treats her nice, that might feel awkward for her, but we teach them that you can get used to happiness."

Boys get plenty of focus.

"I want them to understand from a child's perspective how important a father is," Rubenstein says. "I've met so many young men heartbroken because they are not with their children. Just because you don't like the mom, there's still a child out there yearning for you."

More than 2,300 teenagers have gone through Rubenstein's curriculum, which she recently sold to nonprofits in Mississippi and Nebraska, while also keeping it alive in California.

This week, Jaina King, a Millbrook High student, described in her workbook the vision she has of her adult home: "Comfy, warm, smells like cinnamon, by the ocean, really big, with a pool and petunias, and daisy's, and sunflowers, Baby would have a walk-in closet, smell like chocolate cookies."

More than 90 percent of participants have said the classes made them feel more willing to wait to have children, better equipped to choose a life partner, and better prepared to care for a future child.

"I thought it would be hardest to reach at-risk kids," Rubenstein says, "but I found they are even hungrier for information. Their percentage for finding the class helpful was 95 percent and above."

Recognize the needs

It was the whispers of abuse from a child she was tutoring at an impoverished California school that opened Rubenstein's eyes to the great needs of at-risk children. Rubenstein, 55 and single, eventually became a foster parent to that child and his siblings.

"Once you're aware of something like that, I felt compelled to act on their behalf," she says. "Who else would?"

Who else, indeed. My hope is that we all pray for opened eyes this year and try to fill the needs revealed, however great or small.

"There is always something we can do, that we all can do," Rubenstein says. "It's way too expensive and too hard after the fact to try to fix these problems."