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# Can Teaching About the Realities of Parenting Prevent Unplanned Pregnancy?

RANDI RUBENSTEIN | 02.27.2014



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*“I learned taking care of a child isn’t all unicorns and glitter.”  
– Female (15)*

*“I learned that you have other ways to educate your kids instead of just hitting them.” – Male (17)*

*“I learned even if I want a child right now, if I just wait and finish school my child will have a better life.”- Female (17)*

These telling comments were made by high school students after recently attending the program “Healthy Foundations

for Future Families.” Developed by the nonprofit organization Education for Successful Parenting (ESP), this program provides adolescents with information and life skills so they can make thoughtful choices *before* they conceive their first child.

#### **Inspiration for the Program**

It is a sad fact that many people enter into parenting insufficiently prepared to care for their children. The United States ranks highest among developed nations for rates of children living in poverty, children born to teen parents, and children growing up without a father. Of further concern, child abuse and neglect is reported on behalf of 6 million children in the U.S. each year.

My personal journey to founding ESP began in the 1990s after a startling experience as a volunteer teacher at an elementary school. One of my third-grade students, confiding his fear and shame amid streaming tears, revealed his hidden bruises. He looked to me for help. As I worked with his family, the school, and Social Services, I decided to become a foster parent. Within a few years, my home was filled to capacity with foster children. I became acutely aware of the many children in need and how difficult it is to repair families that are weak from their foundation.

Motivated to address these profound problems, I realized the only effective solution would be a preventive one – educating teens how to form healthy families from the start. Drawing upon my academic background and work experience in public health, I began to consult with local teachers and I designed what I refer to as a “pre-parenting education” program. I then left the corporate world to found ESP and devote my time to this important endeavor.

#### **“Healthy Foundations for Future Families”**

ESP’s primary program, “Healthy Foundations for Future Families,” guides teens to thoughtfully consider the responsibilities of parenting, as they learn about real-life challenges and ways to build their parenting capabilities. Topics such as relationships, preconception health, shaken baby syndrome, budgeting, and child safety are presented in teen-friendly language. The centerpiece of the program, ESP’s student workbook *My Life-Plan for Parenting*, allows teens to document their ideas and plans.

Since 2005, ESP has instructed 4,000 teens. Over 90% of ESP students believe they will be better able to postpone forming a family until adulthood, and they will be better prepared to care for their children when they do become parents.

### **Three Powerful Lessons for Teens**

From the many valuable lessons included in ESP's program, three have emerged as the most powerful for helping teens plan for a healthy and stable family.

#### **1. Envisioning Their Dream Family**

Every good plan begins with goals. Ironically, most “family planning” programs focus on how not to have a family. ESP takes a more straightforward approach by inviting teens to consider their desires for family in concert with other life goals. It's been a revelation to us that teens have surprisingly clear hopes for their future children. As ESP helps teens clarify their plans to fulfill their dreams, teens tell us they are more highly motivated, not less, to continue their education and career preparations. By considering their young adult years as a time to prepare for a future family, rather than narrowly focusing on pregnancy prevention, teens feel their dreams and goals are being fully supported.

#### **2. Understanding the Importance of Adolescent Choices**

Long before a child is conceived, adolescent choices and behaviors can set the stage for an emerging family. ESP's program guides teens to consider personal qualities for healthy relationships, and for responsible and caring co-parenting. Teens also explore the effect of unintended pregnancies and teen parenting on everyone involved, especially the children. Common adolescent health risks (e.g., alcohol, drugs, tobacco, poor nutrition, promiscuity) are studied for their potential impact on a future pregnancy, family dynamics, and the lifetime wellbeing of their future children. By delving into topics relevant to teens' daily lives, teens gain vital understanding of how their current behaviors are shaping the trajectory for their future family.

#### **3. Learning How to Meet Children's Needs**

Having a realistic understanding of children's needs is

fundamental to healthy parenting and preventing many circumstances that lead to child maltreatment. ESP helps prepare teens by introducing information about child development and parenting responsibilities. Hands-on skill-building lessons in budgeting, problem-solving, and positive discipline techniques help them start building capacities to meet those responsibilities. Teens often tell us that gaining this insight into parenting activities increases their motivation to wait and be fully prepared before accepting the sacred responsibility of caring for a child.

### **The Future**

We hope sharing these lessons will inspire parents and teachers to initiate similar discussions with teens about their plans for a healthy future family. We hope policy-makers will take note of our preventive work demonstrating that school-based pre-parenting education is feasible and well-received by students, parents, and schools. And looking ahead, Education for Successful Parenting plans to forge new partnerships with professionals and supporters to continue implementing, evaluating, and expanding our work.

We will all benefit – personally, socially, economically – when families are strong from the start. We believe programs like ours, that engage teens in planning for their parenting responsibilities, can help teens prepare for a better future and create a lasting legacy for our next generation of children and all the generations to follow.

### ***About Education for Successful Parenting (ESP)***

*ESP is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Raleigh, NC. Their mission is to improve the health and wellbeing of children in our communities by educating young adults (ages 13-21) about parenting before they conceive our next generation of children. ESP conducts onsite programs in North Carolina and Southern California. Their student workbook *My Life-Plan for Parenting* is available on Amazon.com; instruction kits and training can also be obtained from ESP. In 2012 and 2013, ESP earned GreatNonprofits' Top-Rated Award. For more information, visit the ESP website at [www.eduparents.org](http://www.eduparents.org).*

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**RANDI RUBENSTEIN IS A REPORTER FOR THE SHRIVER REPORT.**

Randi Rubenstein founded Education for Successful Parenting (ESP) in 2005 to bring a blend of health and planning perspectives to a new field of pre-parenting education.

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