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Classes open an intimate world

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She was born in a small Mexican village in the 1950s, had her first boyfriend at 19 and was still a virgin when she married a few years later. Little wonder that Juanita Jurado looked perplexed when she was handed a small, blue package at a sex-education class recently.

"How curious," said the 51-year-old mother of three. It was the first time she had ever seen a condom, much less held one. Initially, she had trouble ripping open the package but quickly came up with a solution: placing it in her mouth and attacking the foil with her teeth as if she were tearing open a bag of chips.

"I think you broke it, Juanita, try it again," Maria Salas patiently said in Spanish as she handed Jurado another Planned Parenthood condom with which to practice. "This is all going to help our children."

Jurado was one of a growing number of Mexican women recruited to attend the sex-education class as part of an effort to reduce pregnancies among Hispanic teens in St. Paul called "Plain Talk/Hablando Claro."

For almost a year, Salas and two companions have been dispensing condoms, medical information and parenting advice to people such as Jurado: poor, under-educated Hispanic adults who have children or are raising children but who know little about sex, reproduction or sexually transmitted diseases.

"That's our target audience," said Kara Beckman, health program manager at Neighborhood House, the St. Paul nonprofit that runs the program. Jurado was one of three women who attended the sex-education seminar last week. All of them learned about sexually transmitted diseases, contraception and got instruction in how to place condoms on life-size artificial penises.

The women also spent time talking about the fact that they grew up knowing nothing about sex or reproduction. Jurado said she remembers growing up believing that women got pregnant simply by sitting next to a man.

"I remember being pregnant with my first child and still not knowing where the baby was going to come from," said Margarita Villanueva, 59, who has seven children, 15 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Tupperware model

Plain Talk/Hablando Claro involves fanning out into the community and recruiting adults to attend "home health" parties so small groups can talk about sex education and communication issues.

"It's a Tupperware party model," Beckman said. "It's a start-small-and-grow model."

Beckman and others say teaching parents about such things as anatomy, physiology, sexual intercourse, AIDS, chlamydia, herpes and contraception makes it easier for them to talk to their children.

The more Hispanic families talk about sex and its consequences, the easier it is for their children to get vital information that can help them make more responsible choices, health professionals said.

"I don't think [Latinos] talk about this subject much," Beckman said. "There's a really big communication gap."

The St. Paul program is an offshoot of an effort started years ago by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which was able to reduce teen pregnancy rates in several major cities.

"It's a great program," said Brigid Riley, executive director of the Minnesota Organization on Adolescent Pregnancy, Prevention and Parenting in St. Paul. "Plain Talk is a proven strategy. We're trying to get it started in several other communities around Minnesota."

The model was brought to St. Paul's West Side two years ago after an analysis of data from the 2000 Census showed that the pregnancy rate for Minnesota's Hispanic teenagers was climbing dramatically. In fact, it rose from 78.9 births per 1,000 in 1989 to 137.5 per 1,000 in 1999, making Minnesota's Hispanic/Latino birth rate the second highest in the country.

Although the teen pregnancy rate for Minnesota's Latinos has dropped somewhat since 1999, it remains about five times the rate for their white counterparts and is the highest rate among minority girls.

"It's too early to say if we are having an impact," Beckman said. "We have some [anecdotal] evidence that people are communicating more. But whether that means we are changing teen pregnancies, we don't know."

Although Plain Talk/Hablando Claro is aimed at adults, the program also has hired three teenagers to talk to and recruit children to attend the presentations.

Tanya Villalobos, one of the teenage recruiters, said she finds that children are often afraid to talk with their parents about sexual issues or what they are doing.

"Sometimes you're afraid to talk because then they'll think you're doing something," said Lupe Morales, 15, who was among the group of children who attended the sex education class with adult relatives.

Villalobos, 16, has received extensive sex education training, but says even she finds it difficult to communicate with her mother. "I can talk to [my mom] about some things but it isn't easy," Villalobos said.

Most of the problems seem to stem from the religious and cultural barriers that many Hispanics face growing up. Most belong to the Catholic Church, which prohibits the use of contraception. Also, cultural taboos prevent the open discussion of sex between men and women, so most children grow up ignorant about the facts of life.

"It is difficult because of the culture," said Maria Elena Escoto, a Neighborhood House volunteer who also works for the Plain Talk/Hablando Claro program. "There are a lot of taboos, a lot of things we don't talk about. My mother barely talked to me about menstruation."

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