

Excerpt of the American Indian Teen Pregnancy Panel April 2010, Billings, Montana

Montana Indian Education Association Conference STUDENT STRAND

American Indian Teen Pregnancy Panel

The Montana Indian Education Association and the Montana Wyoming Tribal Leaders Council collaborated to provide, as a part of the Annual MIEA Conference youth track, an American Indian Teen Pregnancy Panel to provide real life stories to the youth.

We had three panelists, two adults and one teenager. They are all American Indian; tribal members of the Blackfeet, Crow and Chippewa-Cree Tribes. A short script or questionnaire was given to them in order to provide them with some guidance on what kind of topics come up when addressing teen pregnancy.

Jewel Deschamps-Gopher, a Native American Outreach Coordinator with Planned Parenthood in Great Falls Montana, facilitated this portion of the youth track. She has dual citizenship in both the Chippewa Cree Tribes in Rocky Boy Montana and the Louis Bull Band of Cree in Hobbema Alberta Canada.

Based on the script given to the panelists, some common themes arose. *First*, approximately 90% of the students participating in the audience raised their hands when asked if they knew someone who is pregnant or has a child who is their age (high school age). The current data tells the same story. The students were able to observe, through storytelling, the trials and tribulations these panelists went through having a child at such a young age. All of the panelists agreed on the difficulties they had during this time; financially, spiritually and emotionally.

Experiencing Teen Parenthood

"We were just kids ourselves, and then had to raise one..." They spoke of how on the reservation there were not any "services" to help teenage parents. The extended family could not or would not help. One of the panelists expressed her feelings of despair and the total loss of freedom, the resentments she had about not being able to do what she wanted. She was alone; the father left her to raise their child. This is the *second* common theme, being a single parent. When the audience was asked out of their peers who had children or who were pregnant if both parents were present, only about half raised their hands.

The *third* theme was economics. It costs approximately \$15,000/year to raise one child. This dollar amount includes diapers, childcare, food, clothing and shelter. This is the bare minimum. The facilitator expressed that a minimum wage full time job in Montana is approximately \$10,000/year. If a higher percentage of teen parents are raising their children alone it is hard to believe that the child is getting the optimum amount of care needed to be healthy.

Solutions

The panelists were asked what they would recommend to the audience regarding teen pregnancy. The following summarized their responses as it pertains to teens in Native American communities.

- ***Culture/Spirituality/Cultural Resiliency*** -- Empowering tribal communities to utilize existing cultural knowledge to promote decision making that benefits the individual and community. An example would be to share cultural knowledge of reproduction as it pertains to contemporary society with the whole community through education venues such as schools, tribal colleges and in-service trainings with community organizations.
- ***Self*** -- Empowering individual youth to find their place in the community, home, school, etc. Sometimes our families, caretakers, etc. are “incapable” of providing the needed support to their child due to many issues; beginning with historical trauma and including but not limited to substance abuse, suicide and sexual abuse. Often times when parents are immersed in their own pain it can be difficult to focus on the well-being of a child but the adult or guardian may not “know” how to deal with it.

The teenage panelist stressed how grateful she was and is for Young Families, a local program that provides assistance to teen parents while they complete their education. She shared that it was not just about the academic piece, but about the caring staff and the philosophy of the program.

- ***Family/Community*** -- Empowering the community to foster the youth who do not have a positive home to go to. A lot of times, youth wander aimlessly from home to home with having no real roots so they become lost souls and look for anything to help them to feel “real.” Sometimes this could be pregnancy, starting their own families so to speak, so that they do have someone.

The issues in the aforementioned paragraphs appear to be related directly to a fundamental lack of support from family and their individual communities. This may or may not be due to historical trauma and its ramifications, such as substance abuse, suicide and/or mental illness. The natural ability to cope with issues was lost along with our core fundamental value system we used prior to the arrival of non-Indians. Re-awakening this value system seems to be at the forefront when confronting these issues.

Final Words

A Montana Tribal Leader present was able to speak to the youth at this time. He expressed growing up without a father and how it led him down a path that was not good. He asked the youth to be proud of being Indian and to take responsibility for your words; such as “I Love You.” He said that love is a commitment a lifelong responsibility so when you make the decision to love someone it is serious. If you or your friends become pregnant, support them; do not turn your back on them. Remember that when one door shuts another opens and to heed the message.