

# How to save more black babies

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Delivering a baby is "like having one foot in the grave."

The teenage girls had heard this from older women - their mothers, grandmothers, aunts, neighbors. So, naturally, they were afraid of the pain they would feel when the time came for them to deliver. They were less concerned that their babies might be premature, underweight or more likely to die before their first birthdays. After all, "everybody knows" that black babies die more often than babies of other races.

And they were not concerned about getting prenatal care; one admitted not knowing what "prenatal" meant. Well, unless they had "sugar" (diabetes) and had to go to the doctor frequently.

Food? "I eat anything," one pregnant teen said. Another said that she ate "everything except hot foods." But even that didn't matter, because "anything you eat, you're still going to have heartburn."

The girls' comments were among those collected during 12 hours of focus groups from April 30 to May 8, from African-American teens, men and women, and Haitian-American women, from Belle Glade to Delray Beach to Riviera Beach. The Children's Services Council of Palm Beach County conducted the interviews to help explain why "Our Black Babies Are Dying!"

That's the message a new flier screams, followed by: "16 of every 1,000 black babies in Palm Beach County never take their first breath. Of all the babies - black, white, Hispanic and all other races born here - the largest number that do not live to celebrate their first birthday are black."

The council is asking "anyone interested in helping change the numbers" to attend town hall meetings next month in one of three areas where most babies are dying: Belle Glade (June 5 at the Belle Glade Commission Chambers); Riviera Beach (June 10 at J.A.Y. Ministries, 2831 Avenue S) and Delray Beach (June 12 at the Naoma Donnelley Haggin Boys and Girls Club, 1451 S.W. 7th St.). Each meeting will last from 6:30 p.m. to 8 p.m.

The information gathered from the focus groups reveals a large part of the problem: a lack of education.

For advice, children are relying on friends and some adults who expect black babies to be born prematurely and do not believe that diet and environment contribute. Pregnant teens are around cigarette and marijuana smoke; some girls are even smoking, too. Some are drinking. Once born, babies are left with inattentive adults. The babies inhale smoke. They can reach needles used for drugs.

Thirteen percent of the 3,940 black babies born in Palm Beach County in 2006 were underweight. More than 11 percent of the mothers got prenatal care in the third trimester or not at all. Two-thirds of the mothers did not graduate or had only a high school diploma.

The sad confessions of the teens - most with newborns or expecting this summer - make obvious the need for comprehensive sex education in schools, access to programs that promote sound decision-making over sex and access to contraception. They also prove the value of programs such as Healthy Start, which provides health screenings to pregnant women.

Despite the bleak picture from the focus groups, there is some good news: Fewer babies are dying in Palm Beach County. A higher percentage of babies are born at healthy weights. Fewer young teens (14 and under) are giving birth.

But at 10 a.m. today, when the Children's Services Council releases its Birth Outcomes Update, the report will show "a mixed bag" of progress. The bad news is really bad: The number of teens ages 15 to 19 giving birth increased for the first time in eight years. Fewer women are getting prenatal care during the first trimester. And racial disparities continue.

In 2006, in the poor, rural, predominantly black town of South Bay on Lake Okeechobee, three of every 58 babies born died before age 1. That infant death rate is more than 10 times the rate of Palm Beach County as a whole. Other zip code pockets - Boca Raton (33433), Pahokee (33476) and Riviera Beach (33404) - had infant death rates three times higher than the county's rate.

The flier that shouts "Our Black Babies Are Dying!" asks "Why? What Should We Do?" We must start with education.