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# **REDUCING TEENAGE CHILDBEARING IN THE HMONG COMMUNITY: FIRST YEAR RESULTS**

**SHARON ROLNICK**

The high incidence of teenage pregnancy and parenting for Hmong girls is culturally rooted in century-old traditions and values. Traditionally the Hmong marry during their teens with childbirth closely following. Within the Hmong's native community, such practices do not necessarily pose problems for the future of the teens involved. Here in America, however, consequences of early marriage and childbearing are numerous, as those who do not complete their education severely minimize their opportunities for the future. The Southeast Asian Community leaders in St. Paul, Minnesota, have come to recognize the ramifications of maintaining these traditions within the American culture. They were disturbed with 1980s data indicating that many Hmong girls were not completing their high school education. They were also concerned that in the special program designed for pregnant high school girls, 40 percent were Southeast Asian. These leaders have concluded that they must find ways to discourage the practice of early marriage and childbearing. To this end, Lao Family Community has undertaken a multi-faceted program to reduce the rate of teenage pregnancy within their community. The program, which will be in effect for three years, has just completed year one.

## **PROGRAM COMPONENTS**

The Lao Family Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Project has three major components directed toward 1) junior high school girls, 2) high school students, and 3) parents. The junior high school support groups are designed to help Hmong girls in grades 6-8 better understand issues of early marriage and pregnancy, and the importance of education in the American society. The groups also work to develop decision-making skills, to assist the girls in making choices and coping within two cultures with differing values. The support groups are offered throughout the year in ten week sessions. The high school students are targeted to see Lao Family counselors and to use the school-based clinics for general health needs as well as for family planning and prenatal care. The parent groups are designed to assist Hmong parents better understand the limitations that early marriage and pregnancy place on the personal development of their children in America and the importance of education to their children's future (girls as well as boys). The group also attempts

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to help the parents adjust to customs that differ greatly between countries (e.g., dating, parties) and stresses the need to communicate with their children regarding the issues. Parent groups are scheduled for six sessions.

## **PROGRAM PARTICIPATION**

A total of 138 students from thirteen junior high schools and 203 students from eight high school programs participated in the program. Seventy-five parents were recruited through neighborhood affiliations with Lao Family Community. These numbers approached targeted projections.

## **OBTAINING INFORMATION ON THE PROGRAM**

To obtain data on the various program components, several surveys were developed. Junior high and parent groups completed questionnaires preceding and following their support group sessions in order to document changes over time. For high school students, who may have had only one interaction with the counselor, records were kept on issues discussed during the session. In addition, 75 of the high school students seen were selected at random for a more in-depth telephone interview. Junior high school students were surveyed on self-esteem and how they view their interaction with their parents. All participants in the program were surveyed on attitudes toward education, marriage, child-bearing, birth control, and parent-child communication.

## **BACKGROUND ON THE HMONG COMMUNITY**

The Hmong involved in this program came to the United States from Laos. Most arrived in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Historically, the population made their livelihood by farming in the mountains of China and Southeast Asia. With the war in Laos, however, it became increasingly impossible to maintain stable fields. Many were forced to relocate, sometimes rather abruptly [see case history]. In fact, after the collapse of the Royal Lao Government, the new leadership's policy was quite anti-American. Any Hmong village considered pro-American was to be burned, the animals slaughtered and the people chased down and killed. To escape, many fled to surrounding jungles. The survivors ultimately made their way to relocation camps.

It was in these camps that the concept of formal education grew in popularity. Traditionally, there was no strong cultural need to read or write. Customs were passed orally from generation to generation. Until 1939 there were no local schools at all for the Hmong to attend. When some schooling became available, opportunity to attend remained quite limited. Relatively few young men whose families could afford to have them move to more urban areas received the formal education. Most families lived too far without transportation and without the ability



to allow their children to leave their farming responsibilities. Even today older people and women over age twenty remain illiterate.

With the growth of refugee camps, which developed into fair-sized towns, schools were established. The increased availability of formal instruction altered attitudes about education. Learning the basics of reading and writing became viewed as beneficial to improve the individual and to help with adjustment to their new lives. Attitudes toward marriage postponement, childbearing and women's roles, however, were far less affected. In Laos, women marry early, have several children and accept the strong patrilineal clan system which serves as the primary integrating factor in the Hmong culture. Promoting decision-making skills for females, postponement of marriage and family, and the idea of educating young people beyond basic skills remain quite foreign to this population. This makes the program being conducted particularly ambitious.

The following are results from year one.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD EDUCATION**

The most encouraging area of the study was on attitude toward education. Its importance is clearly evident. All parents rate education as "very important" to their children's future. The students also ranked education as a priority. Asked about plans for future education, 63 percent of junior high students and 86 percent of high school students reported they plan to obtain education beyond high school. Further, when asked to name one goal they have for themselves, 45 percent of the junior high students and 75 percent of the high school students gave responses that were education related. Other goals stated by students included to work (12%), to be successful (8%) and to wait before getting married (5%).

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD MARRIAGE AND CHILDBEARING**

Questions about marriage and family showed some change from baseline to post-session survey with the junior high school students. After the sessions, these students appeared to be more aware of the American society's preference to delay marriage and family beyond the teenage years. Whereas in the baseline survey 54 percent of the junior high school girls selected ages below 20 as the best age for marriage, the percentage had declined to 39 percent following the sessions.

Comparisons of the best ages to marry among junior high students, high school students and parents can be found in Figure 1. Parent responses were clearly toward the younger ages. Although no parent reported age 16 or under as the best age to marry, over 60 percent felt marriage before age 21 was preferred. Only 39 percent of junior high students selected ages under 21 as best to marry and only 27 percent of those in high school did so.

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Regarding childbearing, the age range where the biggest shift was noted in junior high students was between the ages of 23 and 28. In the baseline survey 25 percent of the students indicated they would probably have a child between 23 and 28 years of age. Following the sessions that percentage had increased to 39 percent. Fifty-nine percent of high school students selected that age range. Parents, who had selected earlier ages to marry also showed a preference to childbearing in the late teens and early twenties.

## **ATTITUDES TOWARD BIRTH CONTROL**

The area of birth control is one of some discomfort for this population. Even after attending the sessions, several of the junior high school students were unsure of their attitudes toward birth control. High school students indicated less ambivalence about birth control but were not likely to use it. Of the 75 students interviewed following their meeting with Lao Family counselors, only two reported having used any form of birth control. Both of these students had used condoms. Parents also found this an area of discomfort. Asked if they felt their children should use birth control at times they did not wish to become pregnant, 62 percent were unsure. Even when asked if they would like more information on birth control for themselves, 30 percent did not know. This is not a topic that is easily discussed.

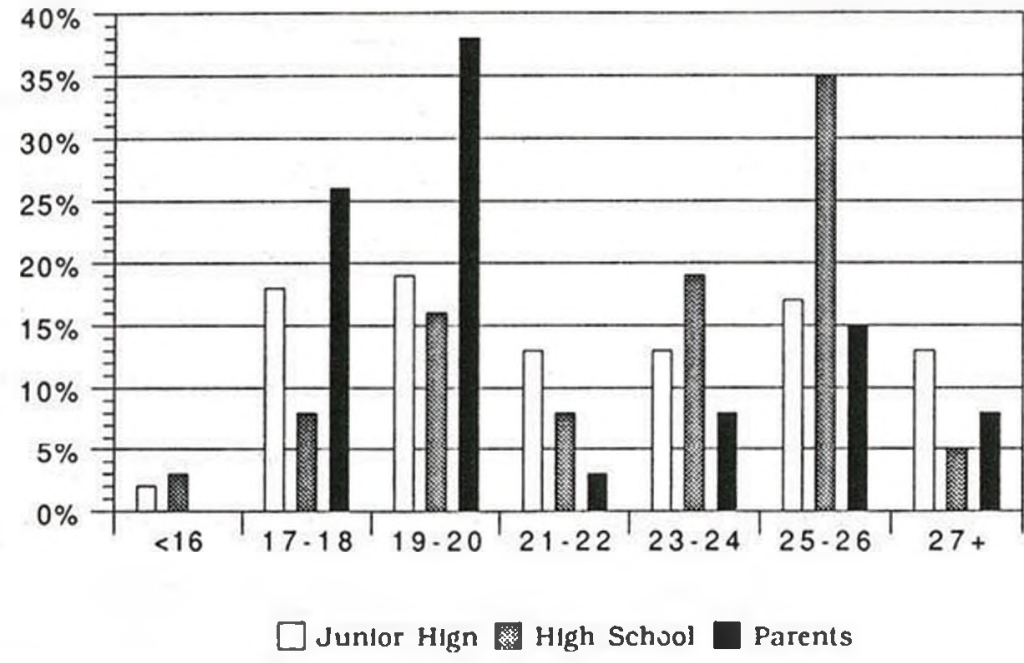
## **JUNIOR HIGH STUDENT RESPONSES TO SELF-ESTEEM QUESTIONS**

An examination of items on self-esteem found the junior high school girls somewhat modest. One-third answered "I don't know" when asked if they were a "good person," or "able to do things as well as others." Of the five items asked, two showed shifts from data collected at baseline. Following the support group sessions 72 percent of those responding claimed they could speak up for themselves, as compared to 61 percent at baseline. However, 55 percent of the post-session respondents claimed they feel they can make their own decisions, whereas 69 percent had answered "yes" to that item at the baseline survey.

## **INTERACTION WITH PARENTS**

Junior high students overwhelmingly reported that their parents interacted with them in positive ways "very often" or "sometimes" (Figure Two) and responses were consistent both pre and post session. Sixty percent of the students indicated that their parents encouraged them to do their best "very often" and approximately one-third reported parents often "do all they can to help their children" and "give reasons when they ask their child to do or not do something." In only one area did fewer than 85 percent of the students respond with an indication of support from

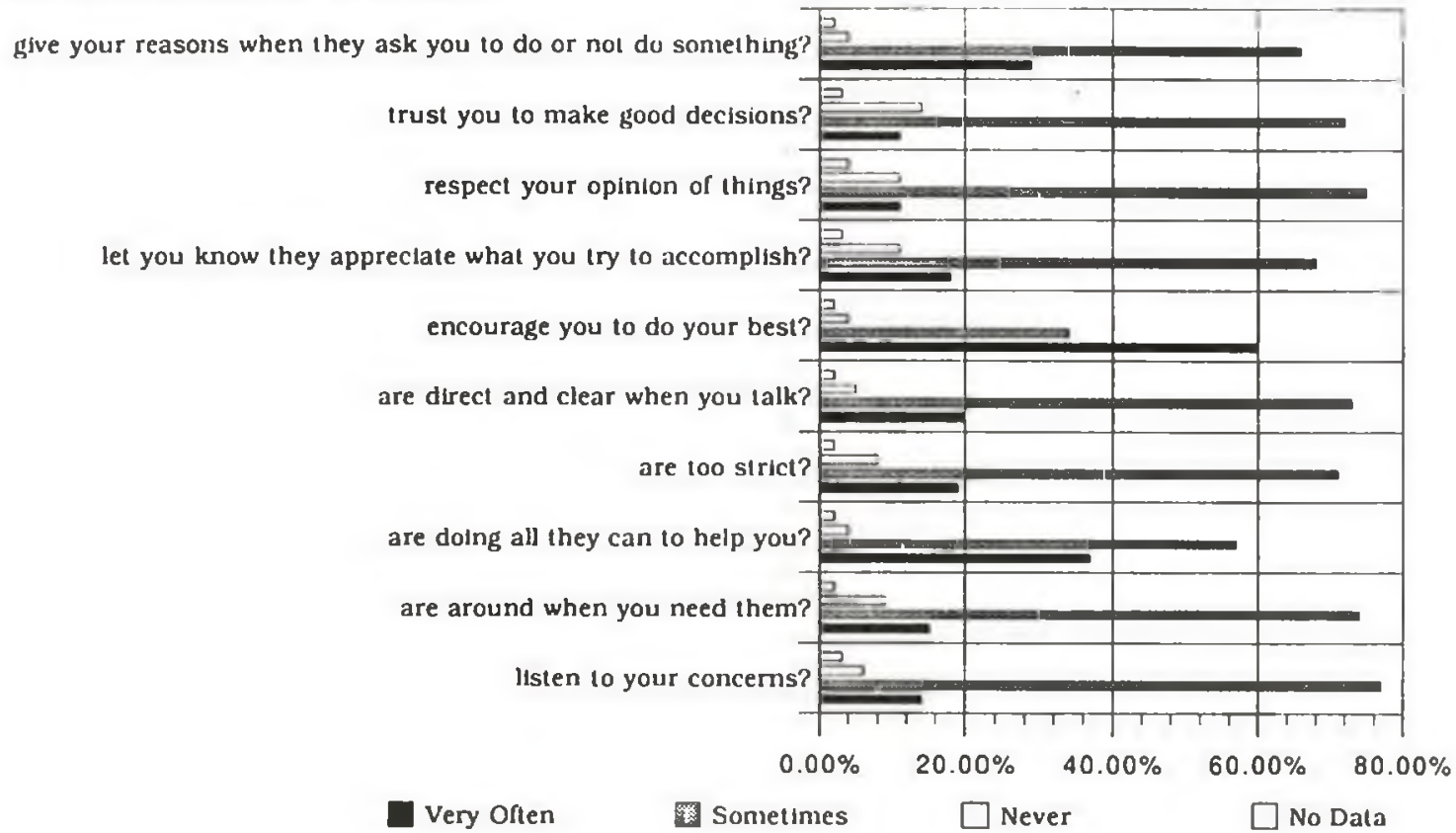
FIGURE 1: BEST AGE TO MARRY  
RESPONSES FROM JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS,  
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND PARENTS



• Junior high and parent responses reflect post-session data.

**FIGURE 2:  
JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS' PERCEPTION OF INTERACTION WITH PARENTS**

**How Often Do You Feel Your Parents...**





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parents. This was the item asking if parents "trust you to make good decisions." While this was the item with the fewest students indicating that parents did this "very often" or "sometimes," even here, 83 percent reported parental support.

## PARENT-Child COMMUNICATION

Parent responses on their ability to communicate with their children on various topics generally reflected the responses of the students. All groups indicated good communication on school, friends, and the future. Weak communication was indicated by all groups on sex and birth control. Discrepancies in perceived ability for communication were found on topics of feelings and dating. High school students were more likely to indicate an ability to talk to their parents about their feelings (95%) than were parents (55%). Junior high students felt the least able to discuss feelings with parents (31%). Parents felt more able to discuss the topic of dating with their children than did the students (70% vs. 23-26%).

Figure 3 presents comparisons of the three groups on their view of parent-child communication of various topics.

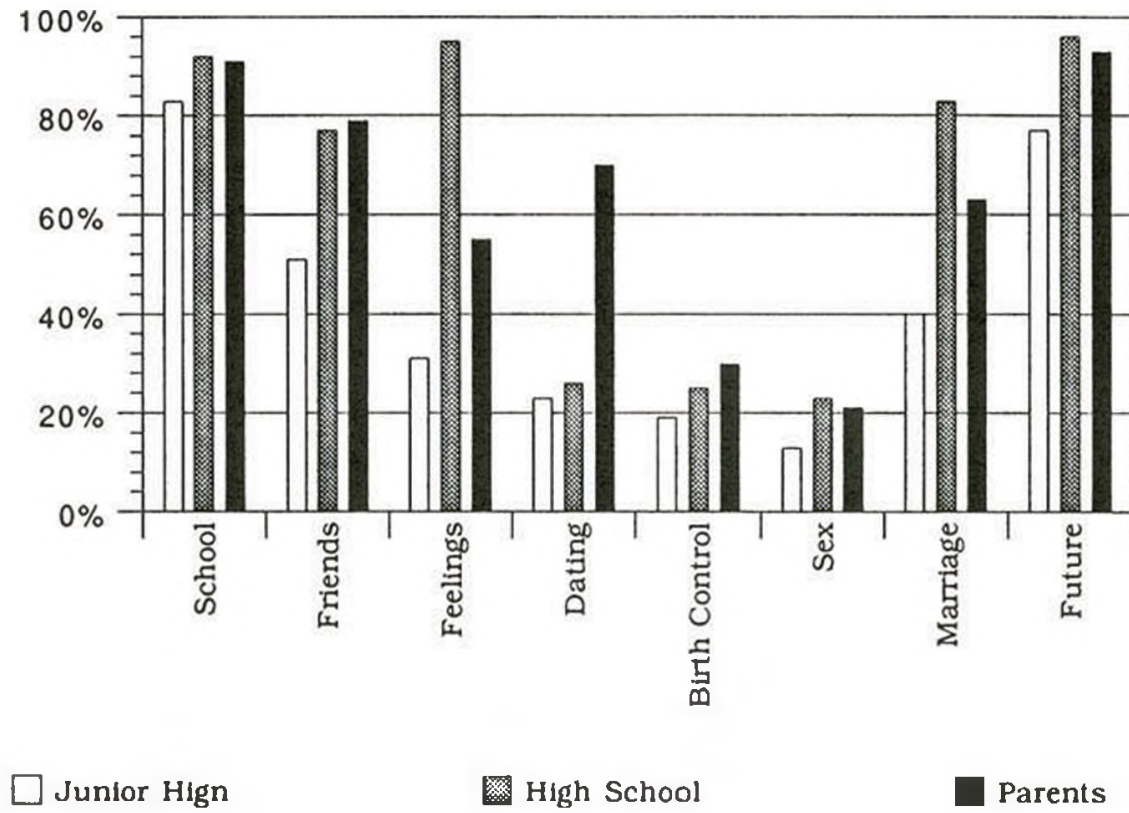
## CASE HISTORY

Mao (who may change her name to Mckenzie), is 24 years old, unmarried, and is one of the counselors for the junior high school component of the project. Like many of the Hmong, she was forced out of her village and fled to the jungle with her family. The family lived in hiding for over a year. At age 15, Mao moved to the United States. First she moved to Illinois, where one relative was living, and then her family came to Minneapolis to join her uncle. Her life while in Laos was fairly typical. Mao was one of ten children. From age five, she helped watch over her younger brothers and sisters, as her parents worked on their farm raising animals and growing rice. When she arrived in the United States she had not formal education and had to learn her "ABCs."

Yet Mao has adapted quickly. She completed high school and is currently enrolled in a technical college. While she may "marry one day," she is not yet ready to make that decision. When asked what she feels is the biggest difference between life in Laos and life in the United States, Mao is quick to point out that in the United States there is greater freedom. She feels her parents have less direct control over her life, although she is sensitive to communicate her choices to them. She also feels she has more choices to direct her own future without facing as many cultural pressures. Mao recognizes that what is right for one person, however, may not be the choice of another. For example, her sister married at age 14, dropped out of school, and now has three children. This may be fine for her sister, but not for Mao. Mao is excited



**FIGURE 3: COMPARISON AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL AND PARENT GROUP:  
REPORTED ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE ON VARIOUS TOPICS**



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about her ability to pursue further education. She would like to become a social worker or work in some aspect of human services. Mao is also very proud to serve as an example for the junior high girls in the groups she leads.

## SUMMARY

Participants in the Lao Family program have been quite positive about the sessions. Parents have appreciated the ability to talk about their concerns regarding their children. They are especially concerned about dating, parties and gangs. The former two areas are so different from appropriate courtship patterns in their native country that United States customs are difficult to accept. The issue of gangs is one of great confusion and concern for the parents. Having an arena for discussion has been beneficial.

The students have also expressed benefits from their participation. Like the parents, the high school students have a need to discuss customs that vary between cultures. They express most interest in learning to better communicate with their parents about customs like dating. They are also pleased with the advice about education they have received from their counselors.

Junior high students, who have had the most extensive component of the program, have indicated several areas where the group support sessions have been beneficial. They have appreciated the ability to share their thoughts and concerns with others. They have found the discussions on the importance of education and the postponement of marriage and family important. For many of these young students, the support group discussions have given an accurate and realistic portrayal of the responsibilities one faces with early childbearing. Hearing this message from those within their own culture, rather than from Americans, has greater impact. It is hoped that such information will serve to encourage them to continue their education and to postpone marriage and family.

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