

Girls Incorporated Memphis, TN

Deborah Hester-Harrison has a passion for preventing teenage pregnancy. She left her job in workforce development to be a part of the solution to a problem she was seeing on a daily basis.

“What I noticed in my work is that we were dealing with a never-ending cycle instead of addressing the root cause,” Hester-Harrison said, noting that the people she helped were largely without an education or job skills, and of the females, the majority had children, usually more than one.

“Kids are having kids and it’s having an impact on their ability to gain skills, get jobs and be self-sufficient. Other issues like poverty, crime and access to healthcare complicate matters,” she said. “We would always be trying to solve a problem on the other end.”

Hester-Harrison felt it would be much easier to spend money and time helping to keep kids in school. Getting an education and skills to get a job are critical, she said, but so is preparing girls so they don’t get pregnant as teenagers.

Programs to stop the cycle of teen pregnancy

As president of Girls Incorporated of Memphis, Hester-Harrison plays a key role in providing information and programming to youth who need it most. Memphis has an extraordinarily high rate of teenage pregnancy compared with the national average, cited from 16-20 percent. In addition, the area has the highest infant mortality rate in the United States, partially due to teenage pregnancies—girls having children without the proper knowledge and skills to safely bring a healthy baby to term and care for it.

RealCare Baby Success Story



Deb Hester-Harrison of Girls, Inc. of Memphis

“What people may not know is that the highest rate of infant mortality cases in our county involve parents under the age of 17. In most other counties in the state, the majority of cases involve adults.”

Girls Inc. endeavors to reach as many young women as they can with its important messages, offering after school and summer programming, as well as outreach to area schools, all to help girls ages 6-18 develop life skills and turn the tide. The organization touches hundreds of girls’ lives each year.

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- Deb Hester-Harrison, Girls Inc., Memphis, TN

Two popular programs focus on preventing adolescent pregnancy and on alcohol and drug prevention. The “Baby Think it Over” one-night retreats with RealCare Baby infant simulators have gotten a lot of attention – both from the community and the press. The girls participate in the retreats through role play scenarios by being assigned an economic situation, a place of employment and a baby, who may or may not have a health condition. It’s each girl’s responsibility to care for the simulator, which cries for attention and requires lifelike care.

The retreats are planned up to eight times a year with approximately 20 girls participating. An additional purchase of infant simulators, made possible through funding by the local Junior League, will allow Girls Inc. to reach twice that number.



Girls, Inc. staff member Charita McCoy showcases RealCare Baby at a conference.

For the most part, Hester-Harrison reports that parents are supportive of the message.

While it’s difficult to follow girls as they get older and leave the program, Girls Inc. is attempting to track their progress. Besides pre- and post-program evaluations, they



Participants in the Girls, Inc. program get ready to use RealCare Baby.

recently launched a Facebook page for girls who have gone through the program. By establishing a connection, they hope to survey their participants for several years. So far Hester-Harrison can say that the rate of pregnancies among girls who have been touched by Girls Inc. is less than that of those who haven’t, but she admits they have much work to do.

“When I left workforce development it was with the idea that I would be committed for the rest of my time primarily to preventing teen pregnancy,” Hester-Harrison said. “Now Girls Inc. does a whole lot more than that, but if we’ve helped prevent teen pregnancy, if we helped girls develop that self-confidence and self-esteem they need to know what’s best for them, we’ll have been successful.”