

# Program teaches kids to make good choices

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — James Findley, 11, summed up the section he liked best in a recent health-and-sex-education class as "learning about the ovaries and stuff."

Findley's answer showed that he had acquired some of the awareness Shirley Maloney-Smith was hoping to impart to the 15 students, ages 8-15, who had participated in the three-day program at the Frost Avenue Recreation Center. The program was designed to heighten students' awareness of the bodily changes that come with puberty, and the need to make sound decisions in adolescence.

Smith, coordinator of the Life Step program, sponsored in part by the Catholic Family Center, works regularly with teens, educating them about the risks of sexual experimentation — risks that include unwanted pregnancies and disease.

Smith imparted some of her knowledge during three morning sessions at the center, from Monday, July 10, to Wednesday, July 13. The classes were part of TOUCH, a summer-long program administered by the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association. TOUCH, which stands for True Openness and Union for Courage and Hope, is staffed by 30 volunteers, who run a variety of athletic, art, music and educational programs for children ages 7-15 in the southwest part of the city.

Smith's three classes emphasized giving students a sense of self-esteem, the kind that comes with an accurate knowledge of one's body and how to take care of it. She said students learn similar information in school, but that there in this era of high teen-pregnancy rates, it is important to repeat the message that it's OK to say no to sex.

"I'm trying to teach them skills to make a decision," Smith said, noting that even with a knowledge of the dangers of teen sex, students might give in to peer pressure. "They may not be sexually active

now, but we want to help them to deter that behavior," she added.

Smith used handouts and question/answer sheets during each class to encourage students to talk about the pressures they face. Most of the students said they had heard gossip about sexually active peers, but had not experimented with sex themselves, she said.

One handout combined humor and prudence to help students stand up to pressure to have sex. For example, instead of feeling obligated to give in to a date's request for sex in return for dinner at a fancy restaurant, the handout offered students this advice: "Return the favor! Next time, you pick up the check at one of those nice places."

Smith's classes also dealt with conflict resolution. Violence and fighting are a constant part of growing up for many students, she noted, so it is important that they learn how to resolve disputes peacefully.

"You don't have to resolve conflicts with physical violence," she told the class. One of the students scoffed at this counsel, Smith said. "How can I live it down with my friends if I don't show who is boss?" he asked. Smith suggested the student either walk away, try to talk it out, or tell a teacher.

Two boys in the class put Smith's advice into action during the last session on Wednesday, July 13. Sitting across from each other during the classes, the two students had argued incessantly. Finally one of the boys hit the other.

Towards the end of the class, though, the boy who had swung his fist turned to the other boy and apologized in front of the class. "I really respect you for doing that," Smith told the boy.

Respect — for oneself and others — was the essence of what the students needed to learn, Smith commented. Yet this sense of respect is frequently undermined by what the students see on television, she noted.

To counter the influence of TV, towards



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

Fifteen students, ages 8-15, participated in a health and sex-education class July 10-13 at the Frost Avenue Recreation Center. TOUCH, a summer-long program administered by the Southwest Area Neighborhood Association, offers a variety of athletic, art, music, and educational programs to children in the southwest part of the city.

the end of the Wednesday class the children recited the Soap Opera prayer: "Almighty and Eternal God," the students intoned, "help us to be no longer the Young and Restless. Help us to remember that we have One Life to Live."

The prayer was a way of enabling the students to relate morality to the fantasy-filled soap operas they watch, Smith remarked. "It's all right to watch soap operas," she told the students, about half of whom said they watched the afternoon dramas. "Just remember, that's someone else's idea of what life's about."

What life is really about, Smith noted, is not letting societal pressures bring about stupid decisions. The students concluded the class by singing the Whitney Houston hit "The Greatest Love of All," which focuses on the need for self-esteem.

"Let your fathers and your mothers read and reinforce the handouts I gave you," Smith told the students as they prepared to leave. "Talk with mother and your father."

EDITOR'S NOTE: TOUCH is sponsored by the City of Rochester, the Rochester Monroe County Youth Bureau, the United Way, the Rochester Area Foundation and private contributors. For information, call Sally Steinwachs at 716/436-8201.



Shirley Maloney-Smith, coordinator of the Life Step program, answers Jermaine Everett's question about a handout given to the students at the Frost Avenue Recreation Center.

## Host families now needed for international students

Host families are being sought for high school exchange students from various countries around the world. American Intercultural Student Exchange, a non-

profit educational organization, is sponsoring this program for the 1989/1990 school year.

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