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Robot babies tackling teenage pregnancies in Colombia

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"Anthony" cried so hard at night that Susana Ortegon couldn't sleep. The weekend felt like an eternity for the 13-year-old.

So when she handed back her "robot baby" it was with great relief. She had taken part in a program launched by the Caldas municipality in Colombia to try to tackle the problem of teenage pregnancies.

"This experience was pretty tough, it's not easy being a mommy or a daddy," Ortegon told AFP.

The baby's cries were so loud that they even bothered her parents.

"It's awful! Awful! On top of that, the baby never stops crying and you've got to look after it all the time," she added.

The baby—a rubber doll with built-in software—cries when it wants to be fed, have its diaper changed or simply needs a cuddle.

It's a voluntary program launched in schools by the Caldas municipality, just outside Medellin, in a bid to reduce the high level of teenage pregnancies in the town of 78,000.

The initiative has been used in at least 89 other countries and is being included in the local authority's social project that includes workshops and sex education classes.

"With this strategy we managed to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies by a huge amount," said Juan Carlos Sanchez, the local authority's health secretary.

When the program began in 2017, the municipality registered 168 pregnancies of girls aged 13-19, which was down to 141 last year, Sanchez said.

More than 1,200 teenagers have taken classes in Caldas, where almost 15 percent of the population is aged 10-19.

In Colombia as a whole, a fifth of babies born in 2018 were to mothers aged 10-19, the national statistics bureau said.

'I got so desperate'

The robot babies are programmed to behave according to a specific age. Ortegon's was designed to mimic the behavior of a two-month-old, which meant it needed care on average once an hour.

"It's like having a real baby," said Ortegon. "Last night I got so desperate I started crying."

At first she called her baby "Tony Stark" after the lead character in "Iron Man" but she later realized the exercise was serious and changed his name.

It's not just teenage girls taking part in the project.

Miguel Angel Suarez spent his entire weekend at home looking after "Sofia" while his friends played football.

"Pregnancies are not just the responsibility of women," said the 17-year-

old, just seconds before Sofia started to cry.

"This teaches us a lesson."

Authorities say the program has been well received by parents, even though some were opposed to sex education, believing it promoted sexual activity among students.

"I think it's a great project because it raises awareness among teenagers that having a child at such a young age, especially without finishing their studies, is very difficult," said Viviana Sierra, Ortegon's mother.

Opposite effect

The exercise appears to be working.

"No way am I thinking about having one at this age," said Suarez, who wants to wait until he has a job so his children can have "a dignified life."

Ortegon, though, worries the program could have the opposite effect.

"It's an authentic experience, but there are some people who could take it in the opposite way," she said, noting that some may feel a real baby "would provide them with company."

She may be right. A study published in the medical journal The Lancet in August 2016 found that teenagers who took part in the initiative showed a greater propensity to get pregnant than those that didn't.

Researchers followed a group of 3,000 teens aged 13-15 until they were 20.

Around half were given the baby simulators and the others a more traditional form of family planning education.

The study found that those included in the Virtual Infant Parenting program showed "higher rates of pregnancies and abortions."

Sanchez admits that on their own, the simulators are not enough.

"But hand in hand with the other (measures) we're using, the intervention, in our case, has been relatively successful and so we're going to keep doing it and extend it for a third year," said Sanchez.

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