

Teen girls conduct health study

Researchers talked
with peers about
nutrition, relationships

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SLASIDE — An unusual team of researchers who spent the past year ferreting out ways to keep Monterey County teenage girls healthy had a secret weapon: themselves.

The 54 people conducting surveys, interviews and focus groups were themselves teenage girls.

"It's a lot less threatening when you are approached by someone your own age," said 15-year-old researcher Michelle Lee.

The Seaside teen joined her colleagues, ages 13 to 19, to unveil their research Monday to community leaders at California State University, Monterey Bay. The team shared how the more than 1,200 girls it had talked with want more information about healthy relationships, good eating and safe sex.

"This isn't coming from the top down. It's coming from their own mouths," said Monterey County Rape Crisis Center Deputy Director Nina Alvarez.

Alvarez is interested in using the research to back up grant proposals for teen dating education programs. The research program, Girls Health in Girls Hands, was conceived about a year ago, said Jobi Marcus, director of the Women's Fund of Monterey County. Teens

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applied to join the program, which was paid for largely through a \$107,000 California Endowment grant. Women's Fund contributors covered the balance of the project's approximately \$120,000 total cost.

The researchers found that girls have a hard time getting information about healthy relationships, maintaining a positive body image and eating well. The consequences of that lack of information are serious: A majority of

the girls interviewed know peers who have been pregnant, suffered depression and battled eating disorders and addiction.

"The research showed we need to focus on their social and emotional health first," Marcus said, before attempts to solve larger problems can succeed.

The teens hope to make that possible. They've already spoken before the Seaside City Council and have presentations scheduled before the Monterey County Board of Supervisors and Board of Education. They're suggesting a series of measures, including:

- Creating a course on emotional health
 - Encouraging schools to charge more for unhealthy foods while increasing the availability of healthy choices
 - Improving access to birth control and reproductive health services
 - Adding information about healthy dating and relationships to sex-education classes
- "Even though we are a couple of girls," said researcher 17-year-old Marina Vosaki of Marina, "we are speaking for every girl in the county."