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NBC bringing up 'Baby Borrowers' buzz



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It has all the trappings of a chatty viewing party for "The Hills," but with an after-school-special twist.

In Sam Weidman's living room, the 17-year-old high school senior and about 20 of his friends have gathered to nosh pizza, drink soda and whisper about what's happening on — and off — his flatscreen TV. Lauren Conrad's latest escapades do not apply to this scene, or the similar ones taking place around the country.

NBC and The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy are educating teens about unplanned pregnancy while enchanting them with "The Baby Borrowers," the network's upcoming new reality show featuring five 18-to-20-year-old couples tasked with taking care of tots, toddlers, tweens, teens and elderly folks on camera.

Unlike "The Hills," this nonscripted series comes with a clear message: Don't get pregnant.

"I don't want to say I didn't have high hopes, but I was kind of nervous what it was going to be like," said Weidman, a member of The National Campaign's Youth Leadership Team. "A lot of times when people try to convey a message to a teen audience, it gets lost in translation because of the age barrier."

On the show, the five teen couples live together for the first time and fast-forward through the various stages of parenthood, starting by wearing an "empathy belly," then caring for a real live infant. After a few days, the couples move beyond babies to toddlers, preteens, young teenagers and eventually senior citizens.

NBC and The National Campaign have previewed the series' first episode at the homes of several adolescents across the country before the show's June 25 debut. The National Campaign, which often works with the entertainment industry on public service announcements and teen pregnancy storylines, created a special discussion guide based on the show.

"It's a format that they're used to," National Campaign senior manager Amy Kramer told The Associated Press after the screening. "It looks like a lot of other shows teens watch, but they get also this incredible message. It's not a 'very special' episode of something. It's not hitting them over the head. It's like real life."

Weidman's preview was attended by three special guests: "Baby Borrowers" executive producer Tom Shelly, co-executive producer Kevin Harris and creator Richard McKerrow, who brought the format to the United States from Britain, where the show generated controversy before it first aired.

"It was great to watch them interact and laugh and joke with each other about it," said Harris. "That drives the conversation. I think we hit the balance between entertainment and education perfectly. If we made it into more of a documentary type of show, I feel like we would've missed it."

There are those who think the show's message does not justify its means.

After NBC announced it was producing an American version of "The Baby Borrowers," Natural Child Project director Jan Hunt posted an open letter on the organization's site, lashing out against the network "for the present and future emotional health of the babies and young children whose lives will be so strongly affected."

"Sudden removal from their parents and placement with strangers for long periods of time is from a baby's point of view no different than a kidnapping," wrote Hunt. "It has been well-established that babies who suddenly lose their primary caregiver can quickly go into mourning and emotional depression."

Shelly said every possible precaution was taken during the 18 days of "Baby Borrowers" production in Eagle, Idaho. The parents of the "borrowed" children were invited to watch their offspring 24-7 on 42 cameras that were placed throughout each of the show's baby-proofed homes and intervene whenever they felt it was necessary.

Trained paramedics and nannies were also on standby, but the nannies were instructed to only assist in case of an emergency, which does occur in one episode when two kiddies wake up from a nap to a house with no parents. Shelly also

said all participants — teens, parents, children and nannies — underwent background checks and psychological testing.

"There isn't a safer place for a child in the whole country," said McKerrow.

Following the screening of the first episode, the "Baby Borrowers" producers, National Campaign staff, Weidman and his parents and friends openly discussed the show, teen pregnancy, birth control and abortion. Weidman said the most difficult part of the evening wasn't the frank discourse. It was coaxing his friends into attending in the first place.

"They were all a little skeptical," he said. "I was nagging them and bribing them with food to come, but I think they ended up being glad they came. I think this stirred them and their beliefs up. They all wanted to talk about it, which I guess was the whole point of the show."

On the Net:

http://www.nbc.com/The_Baby_Borrowers/

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