

MONTANA

Baby, think it over

► Battery-operated dolls give students hours of wet, crying demands

By CHERYL SABOL
The Daily Inter Lake

KALISPELL (AP) — It was the nerve-fraying sound of nonstop infant squalling that finally undid the teen-age girl. In tears herself, she finally dropped the tiny bundle off at a parenting agency and fled.

It's a success story from the Nurturing Center's point of view.

Fortunately, the "baby" is inanimate. Its plastic body encases a battery-operated howl that is as random and as unnerving as a real baby's. And, the newly released "Baby, Think It Over," includes a monitor to record how well its needs are met.

It's a 48-hour role-playing game with a serious message about the responsibility of parenting.

Susan Christofferson of the Nurturing Center bought five of the \$250 dolls with a grant from the Winter Classic Foundation.

The dolls have been used only once so far. Ten students in a family-life class at the junior high school were chosen at random just before the end of school to care for the dolls for two days.

The 8-pound dolls come with a diaper bag and car safety seat provided by Kalispell Regional Hospital. The students are expected to pack around the baby paraphernalia just as they would if the baby were real.

But it's the dolls themselves that provide the challenge. They are electronically programmed to cry at unpredictable intervals, day and night.

To stop the crying, students must "feed" the dolls by inserting a probe into the dolls' backs. The probe is attached to the student's wrist by a band that cannot be removed unless it's cut off — so the responsibility can't be passed off to someone else.

The probe represents feeding, changing diapers and simply holding the baby. After five to 35 minutes of attention, the doll cries



Associated Press

Susan Christofferson of the Nurturing Center in Kalispell, holds a trio of "Baby, Think It Over" dolls. The "babies" wail at unpredictable times, giving the caretaker a hint of the real thing.

again, signifying it is ready to sleep and then it can be put down.

The doll cries if it is left in an unnatural sitting position or placed belly down. It cries if it is handled roughly, and a gadget inside records if the doll is left to cry too long or is dropped, shaken or hit.

Five of the 10 students returned the dolls with an electronic record of neglect. Two had dolls with evidence of abuse

and neglect. Two students took the probes off their arms so someone else could "feed" the baby. One took the battery out of a doll to silence it at about 1:30 a.m.

The students take a test before their experience and one afterward. Christofferson said the 14- to 16-year-old students mostly felt marriage was very important before having a baby. About half thought that babies would improve a relationship with a

spouse and about half thought a newborn would make the relationship more difficult.

Some students changed their views between the pre-test and the post-test.

"Most said they wouldn't have a baby until they're 20 or 25," Christofferson said. None changed her mind about wanting or not wanting a baby some day.

About one-third of the Montana births in 1992 were to teen-agers, 3,030 out of 11,470.