



THE TEXAS CAMPAIGN TO PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

Adults Only: The Role of Adults in Teen Pregnancy Prevention

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Every adult has a stake in teens reaching their full potential. The ability of a society to advance and prosper always depends upon the next generation. Teen pregnancy dramatically reduces the odds of achieving productive adulthood—both for teen parents and their children. How, then, could we be so conflicted about the means to prevent teen pregnancy? Are we missing the forest for the trees by debating HOW to prevent teen pregnancy? The studies are done. We can prevent teen pregnancy. Why aren't we?

This Issue Brief examines the central role that adults play in teen pregnancy prevention. Backed by data and research, it reaches three common-sense conclusions:

- Adults have more influence on teens than they think they do.
- Teens want more information from adults than they are getting, not only about sex but also about healthy relationships.
- Reducing the teen pregnancy rate requires adults to develop the skills and knowledge to assist teens with decisions regarding these key determinants of life trajectory.

Adults Can Agree To Disagree

Adults are divided about what to do to prevent teen pregnancy. This is not an insurmountable obstacle. Preventing teen pregnancies involves more than discussing anatomy, sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and a litany of “don'ts.” It includes forming healthy relationships, setting personal boundaries, developing negotiating skills, avoiding sexually-charged situations, having aspirations for the future, as well as delaying the onset of sexual activity until fully prepared, fully informed, and fully protected. In short, preventing teen pregnancy is sufficiently complex that there is no single solution. There are constructive roles for a wide range of caring adults and a multitude of institutions. Given the importance of teen pregnancy prevention to the well-being of society as a whole, the focus of adults should be on this shared value and the imperative for better informed, more effective, and more frequent communication with teens—not the issues that divide us.

Adults Matter

Adults, particularly parents, have enormous influence on their children. Parental disapproval of adolescents having sex is one of the most significant factors in delaying sexual activity.ⁱ This does not refer, however, to the single performance of “the talk” in late adolescence, but rather the quality of the overall relationship. “Teens who are close to their parents and feel supported by them are more likely to abstain from sex, wait until they are older to begin having sex, have fewer sexual partners, and use contraception more consistently.”ⁱⁱ

While all parents want their children to grow up to become responsible, contributing members of society, they need help. The road to adulthood is perilous, and there are times when other caring adults “can offer a safe haven and an opportunity to discuss sexuality concerns.”ⁱⁱⁱ Sometimes teens are uncomfortable talking to their parents, sometimes parents are uncomfortable talking to their teens, and some parents are not in the picture. In any event, teens who receive support from caring adults outside of their families are more resilient and more likely to avoid a host of high-risk or unhealthy behaviors, including teen pregnancy.^{iv}

The vast majority of adults (89 percent in urban areas and 91 percent in non-urban areas) believe that the community at large should be engaged in efforts to reduce teen pregnancy.^v Bolstering this belief is evidence that community service contributes to a reduction in sexual risk behaviors in teens.^{vi} This finding suggests that simply engaging young people in community life provides an extra layer of protection, opening a host of opportunities for organizations and institutions that have no obvious role in sexuality education.

Finally, there is a missed opportunity in the faith community to play a much stronger, and more direct, role in teen pregnancy prevention. Faith-based institutions can dramatically reduce the fear factor for parents, elevate the skills and knowledge base of teens and parents alike, and increase community support for approaches that have been proven effective. Among the many reasons to involve the faith community are: a) its focus^{vii} on values; b) its credibility; and c) its access to teens, parents, and potential volunteers.^{viii} Moreover, there is not only need but demand: almost three-fourths of teens and adults alike believe that religious leaders and groups should be doing more to help prevent teen pregnancies.^{ix}

Adults Underestimate Their Influence

As children begin the transition from dependency to greater degrees of autonomy, it is perhaps understandable that adults underestimate their influence regarding issues related to sexuality. However, 46 percent of teens report that parents are at the top of their “most influential” list when it comes to making decisions about sex.^x While the media is demonized, and perhaps justifiably so, for its portrayal of sex and sexuality, only 4 percent of teens cite the media as influencing their decisions about sex.^{xi} Peer pressure is also less influential than many adults believe: only 20 percent of teens say that their friends influence their decisions about sex.^{xii} The closest that adults and teens come to a consensus is that 80 percent of teens and 91 percent of adults believe that “it would be much easier for teens to postpone sexual activity and avoid pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.”^{xiii}

Adults Are Tongue-Tied

“What is the most important thing my parents told me about sex? I wouldn’t know. My parents never talked to me, and that’s why I’m a teen dad” –Boy, 17^{xiv}

Perhaps one reason more adults are not communicating early and often with teens on the issue of sexuality is the fear of doing more harm than good. Parents (88 percent) and teens (85 percent) alike agree that

parents are uncertain about when to initiate discussions about sex, what they should say, or how they should say it.^{xv} Teens share their parents' reluctance, citing concerns about whether their parents will think they are having sex, embarrassment, not knowing how to bring up the subject, and fear of being misunderstood.^{xvi}

Given the importance that both teens and parents attach to “more open, honest conversation” with each other as a deterrent to sexual activity and pregnancy, this stalemate is unacceptable. Furthermore, in light of the power imbalance between adults and teens, it is clearly the responsibility of parents and other adults to facilitate these conversations.

While it is unrealistic to expect teens to take the lead, adults are often unprepared to do so. A 2005 study conducted in Texas found that adults, even those with health care backgrounds, had a significant lack of information about the ramifications of sexual activity among adolescents and the health risks of multiple sexual partners.^{xvii} On a 10-item survey, health care professionals answered only 38 percent of questions correctly compared with other adults who answered 30 percent of questions correctly.^{xviii} Despite these initial failing grades, the relatively modest investment of participating in a two-hour presentation yielded enormous improvement in both adult groups: health care professionals scored an average of 87 percent, and other adults an average of 76 percent.^{xix} The opportunity here is obvious. More organizations and institutions throughout the community—service and fraternal organizations, religious institutions, libraries, community centers—should help to create settings where adults can become better informed and better communicators about adolescent sexuality.

Adult Supervision: The Right Amount?

In an era where two incomes are more of a necessity than a luxury, and where men and women are equally interested in participating in the workforce, it is often difficult to provide adequate supervision of teens. Common sense indicates and research confirms that “the more time that high school students spend without adult supervision, the higher their level of sexual activity.”^{xx}

Supervision and monitoring are complex and nuanced issues. There is a difference between supporting and stifling, between being interested and being overbearing. Where those lines are drawn varies from teen to teen. While it is true that adult supervision and monitoring of teen behavior is generally beneficial, “‘very strict’ monitoring by parents is associated with a *greater* risk of teen pregnancy” (emphasis in the original).^{xxi} This serves to highlight the importance of close parent–teen relationships, the touchstone that enables parents to approach this issue with the requisite sensitivity.

Parents and other adults should consider encouraging group activities in lieu of dating. This is especially important for younger adolescents and where there is an age difference between partners. Among 12- to 14-year-olds, if the couple is the same age, 13 percent are having sex; if a partner is two years older, 26 percent are having sex; and if a partner is three or more years older, 33 percent of the relationships involve sex.^{xxii}

This is an area where community support can be invaluable, not only in reducing teen pregnancy but also in strengthening the protective factors that reduce other risky behaviors. Communities can augment parental supervision by offering after-school activities that not only appeal to the varied interests of teens, but also expand the circle of trusted adults in their lives, as well as broaden the range of skills and experiences that contribute to productive adulthood.

Where Adults Agree

Most parents would prefer that their children wait until marriage to have sex, and the vast majority of adults believe that young people should wait to have sex until after high school.^{xxiii} While abstinence is the “*strongly*” preferred option, “the overwhelming majority of adults *also* believe that young people should be given information about the benefits and limitations of contraception and provided with appropriate health services” (emphasis in the original).^{xxiv}

This “both/and” approach is supported by an extensive body of research.^{xxv} Some adults are concerned that messages emphasizing both abstinence and contraception are confusing and contradictory. Kids are smarter than we think they are. “The overwhelming weight of scientific evidence suggests that addressing abstinence and contraception does not hasten the onset of sex, increase the frequency of sex, or increase the number of sexual partners.”^{xxvi} In short, the better-informed teen is significantly less likely to engage in high-risk sexual behavior than the teen who is taught abstinence-only.^{xxvii}

Adults worried about sending a “mixed message” should take a hard look at the wealth of research on teen behavior. Approximately 7 in 10 Texas teens will have sex by the time they are in 12th grade.^{xxviii} In a 2011 survey of high school students, more than one-third had engaged in sexual intercourse in the last 3 months.^{xxix} In their most recent sexual encounter:

- almost 40 percent did not use a condom; and
- almost 77 percent did not use hormonal birth control.^{xxx}

Finally, nearly half of the 19 million new cases of STIs that occur each year are among 15 to 24 year olds.^{xxxi} In practical terms, this requires that we educate teens about how to protect themselves before they become sexually active. Encouraging abstinence is important, but teaching abstinence alone will not get the job done.

Conclusion

It is possible – and desirable – for kids to go through life without using tobacco or abusing drugs or alcohol. However, it is highly unlikely that they will go through life without experiencing sex. While the U.S. teen birthrate has been declining for decades and reached an historic low in 2010,^{xxxii} it remains one of the highest in the developed world.^{xxxiii} Texas has the fourth highest teen birthrate in the U.S. This puts Texas teens at an unacceptable disadvantage and our state’s economy in jeopardy. Unfortunately, the nation bold

enough to send the first person to the moon shrinks from talking to teens about sex, and teen pregnancy prevention is not high on either the national or state agenda.

Every generation has an obligation to prepare the next. In an era where sex is pervasively displayed in every form of media, adults still have difficulty talking about sex despite the heightened risks teens face today. Kids deserve better. They continue to look to adults for guidance, which they are not getting. They want to know about love and relationships and, yes, about sex too. It is time that adults deliver.

Endnotes:

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- ^{iv} The Power of Assets. *Search Institute*. Retrieved from <http://www.search-institute.org/research/assets/assetpower/>.
- ^v Albert, *With One Voice 2010*, p.38.
- ^{vi} Guide to Community Preventive Services. Prevention of HIV/AIDS, other STIs and pregnancy: interventions for adolescents. www.thecommunityguide.org/hiv/adolescents.html (Last Updated June 2009).
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- ^{viii} Involving the Faith Community in Teen Pregnancy Prevention, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Retrieved from <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/getorganized/ch07.pdf>, Chapter 7, p.31.
- ^{ix} Albert, *With One Voice 2010*, p.31.
- ^x *Ibid.*, p.5.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 8.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- ^{xiv} The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001). *Parent Power: What Parents Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/ParentPwr.pdf>, p. 5.
- ^{xv} Albert *With One Voice 2010*, p. 12.
- ^{xvi} The National Campaign, *Parent Power*, p. 8.
- ^{xvii} Sulak et al., p. 1948.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.*
- ^{xix} *Ibid.*
- ^{xx} Guttmacher Institute. (March/April 2003). Teenagers with the least adult supervision engage in the most sexual activity. *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 35, p. 106.
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- ^{xxii} *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- ^{xxiii} Sulak et al., pp. 1949, 1950.
- ^{xxiv} The National Campaign, *Parent Power*, p.11.
- ^{xxv} Guide to Community Preventive Services. Prevention of HIV/AIDS, other STIs and pregnancy: interventions for adolescents. www.thecommunityguide.org/hiv/adolescents.html (Last updated June 2009.)
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- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*
- ^{xxxii} Hamilton, B. E. & Ventura S. J. (2012). Birth rates for U.S. teenagers reach historic lows for all age and ethnic groups. NCHS data brief, no. 89. Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics.
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