

Teenagers Need Birth Control

Saturday, Feb. 8, 2014

BY CINDY BALLARD - SPECIAL TO THE AMERICAN-STATESMAN

Almost all 18- and 19-year-olds have had sex. These older teens account for 71 percent of teen births in the U.S. More than 8 out of 10 of their pregnancies are unplanned. A scant 3 percent are married. Like it or not, premarital sex is the norm in America.

At ages 18 and 19, teens are in transition. Legally, they're adults. But more than half still live with their parents and two-thirds are still involved in some form of schooling. By their own reckoning, they're not ready for parenthood. A huge majority believes that pregnancies should be planned and that it's very important to avoid pregnancy right now. In short, 18- and 19-year-olds are still finding themselves, and it's usually a mistake when they find themselves parents.

While it's convenient to place the blame on teens, cracks in this reasoning appear as soon as you take a look at other developed countries. For example, the teen birth rate in the U.S. is three times higher than our neighbor to the north, Canada, and almost 10 times higher than the teen birth rate in Switzerland. Bringing the issue closer to home, Texas' teen birth rate is almost double California's, even though our demographics are virtually identical.

American women are no strangers to birth control. About 99 percent of us who've had sex have used birth control, including 98 percent of Catholic women. Regrettably, and for reasons based more in fear than fact, birth control remains on America's taboo topic list. Our silence leaves teens to develop their own, often faulty, rationales. For instance, some teens believe that forgoing birth control takes their romance to a new level of intimacy when, in fact, that new level may be single parenthood.

A recent survey found that young people themselves would be more comfortable using birth control if adults talked about it in a more positive fashion. We can do that. Remember how quickly a culture shift occurred when we changed the conversation from "don't drink" to "always have a designated driver"? It's pointless to tell older teens who are already having sex to stop, but it's in everyone's interest to encourage responsible behavior. Personal responsibility is a deeply rooted American value, and it's also the common ground on value-laden issues like birth control.

The genius of "designated driver" is that it translates the abstract admonition to "be responsible" into concrete action. We need to do the same for birth control. If you're concerned that messages in popular media will backfire (and what parent

isn't a bit squeamish when the topic is teen sex?), there's good news. A study just published by the National Bureau of Economic Research concluded that two popular MTV programs about teen pregnancy and parenting, which drew fire for encouraging teen parenthood, have actually contributed to reductions in teen births. By the same token, a solid body of research confirms that educating teens about birth control does not encourage them to have sex.

It's not by accident that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ranks birth control as one of the top 10 public health achievements of the past 100 years. Birth control has enabled millions of men and women to complete educational and career goals, achieve financial stability, and form healthy, enduring relationships. These are the building blocks of strong families, vibrant communities and a thriving economy.

Birth control is the responsible choice for sexually active teens. There are now low-maintenance methods of birth control that all but eliminate human error. Yet access and cost remain significant hurdles that only adults are in a position to address. Safety has been dramatically improved and side effects significantly reduced since I came of age in the 1970s. Unfortunately, I didn't learn this as a matter of course in everyday life, which is where it belongs.

Given the advances in birth control over the last 40 years, and the fact that Americans are delaying marriage until their mid- to late 20s, teen births should be an artifact of a bygone era. Let's direct some of our talent for innovation to make this happen.

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