IT’S POSITIVE:
THE PREGNANCY REVEAL
(IN THEIR OWN VOICES)

Overview
- Becoming a teen parent can be stressful for all involved
- Presumably, the sooner the teen confirms the pregnancy and seeks healthy adult support, the better
- But teens often deny and delay ...
- We explore teens’ experiences in confirming a pregnancy and revealing the news to others, particularly parents
- Teen voices detail the when, who, and how of the pregnancy reveal

Background: The First Trimester
- Early prenatal care
  - Improves pregnancy outcomes (e.g., improved birth weight, reduced risk of preterm delivery)
  - Teens are less likely to get early prenatal care
- Early behavioral changes
  - Pregnant teens are more likely to have history of risk-taking behaviors, such as drinking and smoking
- Timely decision-making
  - Employment, transportation, education, living arrangements
  - Abortion is more risky/expensive after 8 weeks’ gestation
  - Teens are more likely to delay abortion

Background: Social Support
- Informal network
  - Parents, partners, extended family, friends, community
- Often unreliable
  - Teens “piece together” support like a “patchwork quilt”
- Maternal mothers
  - Maternal mothers are most common source of support for teen moms
Background: Social Support

- Emotional and material support improves outcomes
  - Fewer pregnancy complications, greater educational success, diminished risk of maternal depression
- Social support is key factor
  - Meta-analyses: social support is key difference in why some teens experience better outcomes than others
- Lack of support
  - Teen parents (teen fathers in particular) are less likely than their older peers to have adequate social support

When do teens reach out for support?

- California survey of pregnant teens
  - 76.8% shared news of pregnancy within day of discovery
  - But only 16.8% shared news with mom first
  - 16.2% shared with a girlfriend first
  - 42.4% told partner first
- It’s unclear how long teens wait to tell parents
  - 47.7% “didn’t tell mom right away”
  - 55.2% “didn’t tell dad right away”

Contributions to the Literature

- Adds to limited body of qualitative research
- Focuses on social support in prenatal vs. postnatal period
- Includes direct testimony from teen fathers, an underexplored demographic
- Focuses on previously unexamined aspect of teen pregnancy decision-making: when and how teens confirm pregnancy suspicions and reach out

Current Investigation

- 27 young parents, all peer educators
  - 19 women, 8 men
- 3 program sites
  - Austin, El Paso, Houston
- Age range
  - Time of interview: 17-27 years old (median: 22)
  - Time of delivery: 14-23 years old (median: 17)
- Interviews
  - ~90 minutes average (transcripts: ~20 pages each)
- Analysis
  - MAXQDA
Current Investigation

- **Approach**
  - Semi-structured interviews, directed largely by participants
  - Iterative approach:
    - Each interview informed the next
  - Grounded theory:
    - We formed a theory based on content of interviews
- **Two hallmark events in teens’ stories:**
  - A teen’s discovery of pregnancy (suspicion/confirmation)
  - Parents’ discovery of pregnancy

Results

- **Theme 1: When**
  - Timing of the pregnancy reveal
- **Theme 2: Who**
  - Who do teens tell before they tell their parents?
- **Theme 3: How**
  - How did parents ultimately learn about a teen’s pregnancy?

### Theme 1: Timing

**When Parents Learned of Pregnancy**

- **Early (< 3 months):** 7 cases
- **Late (3 months or later):** 14 cases
- **Unknown:** 6 cases

- **Timing**
  - 3 months or later
    - Among these 14 youth, parents found out at 5 months or later in at least 5 cases
  - Delay between teens’ and parents’ discovery
    - 10 of 19 young parents delayed sharing the news with parents for some length of time or never told them at all
    - 9 of 19 youth told parents right away
    - 8 youth did not say (of 27 total)
Timing: Summary

- Teens delay confirming and revealing pregnancy, sometimes until well into the pregnancy.
- Denial is a common first reaction.
- Teens have a sense of invincibility, which allows for denial.
- Fear of telling parents is extensive—leads to unsafe behaviors.
- Fear largely leads to hiding the pregnancy for as long as possible.

Timing: Denial of Suspicions

“...my period's never been normal. But after four months of nothing, I told my best friend, 'I think I'm pregnant.'”

— Ellen, 17

“I still had my menstrual cycle. I did have symptoms, and I took pregnancy tests, and they always came out negative. When I was six months pregnant, I felt something moving, and I was thinking, 'What if it's a worm, what if I'm sick, what if it's something else?' So I went to the doctor.”

— Carmen, 19

Timing: Denial After Confirmation

“The first couple months... I was like in shock. It didn’t really sink in. I really wasn’t thinking about the future, I was just stuck on that mindset. But at this point I had already lost my job. They let me go because I was showing up to work like five minutes late, two minutes late, three minutes late. So after a while I guess they were like, 'Well, it adds up.' So they let me go, and then I’m failing three classes out of four. At the end of the semester, I lost my scholarship, so I had to move out of the dorms.”

— Eva, 20, freshman in college

Timing: Teen Dad Perspective

“She had mentioned something about how she thought she might be pregnant, but we didn’t put much thought into it.”

— Domingo, 17

“She told me she missed her period one month, and I kind of blew it off. I was like, ‘All right, that happens,’ or whatever. And then the next month she missed her period again, and at this time I couldn’t ignore it. So we got a pregnancy test... [After confirmation of pregnancy] I was kind of in denial, like, ‘It’s not my baby,’ or whatever...”

— Juan, 16

“I looked at her like, ‘Huh?’ And mind you, I’m 16 at the time... I was like, ‘Um, get a job.’ And I walked away. I did this because I was scared... I wasn’t going to go off her word and trust her. So I walked away, and I started to ignore her.”

— Diego, 17
**Timing: Teen Dad Perspective**

“We didn’t know [that she was pregnant], but we were throwing up, and me and my girlfriend would deny it all the time because we were scared. Eventually I told my mom. You know, I had to tell her, even though I was embarrassed. She was like my father and my mom. So I told her, and she took me and my girlfriend to a clinic. … She was already three months [pregnant].”

– Marcos, 17

**Timing: Personal Reckoning, Denial**

“She misses her period for one month, tells me, and of course, me being in denial, I told her, ‘Don’t worry about it – something’s probably wrong with you.’ Second month came, she misses her period, I decide, ‘You know what, she might be pregnant.’ But it’s only a lingering thought in the back of my mind. Now she told me this, and I’m thinking to myself, ‘What if she is pregnant? Probably not.’ And I tell her, ‘Don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it, don’t worry about it.’ So we split off for the third month. She tells me she missed her period again. At this point, I knew that she was pregnant.”

– Dao-Ho, 16

**Timing: “Can’t Happen to Me”**

“For some reason, we thought she was invincible and we were immune to having a child. And – she wasn’t.”

– Dao-Ho, 16

“Of course it can’t happen to the dancer. It doesn’t happen to the good student. It just doesn’t happen to me. I never thought it would happen to me.”

– Kasandra, 17

“I figured, I’m 13 years old, you know, a straight-A student – like, it can’t happen to me.”

– Marisol, 14

“I had that attitude that I was a cheerleader, I was a softball player, that can’t happen to me – when in reality, under the uniform, I’m a human being. It can happen to anyone that doesn’t make smart decisions.”

– Veronica, 16

**Timing: Fear of Telling Parents**

“I went to my room, and I just cried the whole time because I didn’t know how to tell my parents. That was my main thing – I was so scared about what my parents were going to think about the whole thing. … I thought my life was over, my parents would kick me out, and that school was going to be over for me.”

– Mariana, 17

“I told [the school nurse], you know, ‘You’re crazy! If I tell my parents I’m pregnant, they’re gonna kick me out.’ … I didn’t want to tell my parents, because I never got in trouble, so this would be like total shock, like ‘get out of my life’ kind of thing. So I didn’t want to tell them.”

– Marisol, 14
Timing: Fear of Telling Parents

“[My boyfriend] was like, ‘Whoa.’ But then he started smiling, like he was very happy. ... But then later on, after I knew I was pregnant, and he went through this happy thing, then we looked at abortion – because we didn’t want to talk to [our] parents.

– Ellen, 17

Timing: Hiding the Pregnancy

“They [my parents] weren’t supposed to find out, because I was planning on telling them that—at maybe six months or so—that it was an immaculate pregnancy, that she was like the Virgin Mary.”

– Dao-Ho, 16

“I was pregnant during the winter, so I would wear [my boyfriend’s] sweaters, his jackets, like nobody would think anything of it. So I was able to keep it a secret until I was five months pregnant.”

– Teresa, 17

Timing: Hiding the Pregnancy

“I didn’t tell his family or my family until I was five months. I went and bought a bunch of the stuff you wrap your knees with when you have a sprain, so I could wrap them around my stomach so nobody could tell. There are a lot of pictures that I’m really five months at that point, and you can’t tell—my stomach is completely flat.”

– Natalia, 17

Theme 2: Who

The Initial Reveal

- Told parents first, 4
- Told someone else before parents, 17
- Unknown, 6
Theme 2: Who

Who Teens Tell Before Parents About Pregnancy

- Not surprisingly, teen partners are generally told first
- Parents are seldom the first to know – not because of independence, but because of fear
- Older siblings often serve as buffer
- Friends play an important source of support at pregnancy reveal, then typically fade quickly from teens’ lives

In some cases, teens told several people before telling parents.

Who: Friends & Partners

“I ended up saving up my lunch money that my mom gave me. I went to Walmart with one of my cousins, and we bought two pregnancy tests – took them at Walmart because I couldn’t take them at home.”

– Marisol, 14

“I took the pregnancy test, and [my boyfriend] was outside the bathroom with my best friend. I just remember they kept knocking on the door, ‘Are you done yet? Are you done yet?’ … Once I opened the door, I didn’t tell them anything, and they both just ran straight to the test.”

– Teresa, 17

Who: Friends & Partners

“We got a pregnancy test from the 99-cent-only store, and those things work. So I took it, and my friend was with me. She was my age, and she had been my friend since fifth grade. She was like, ‘I want to tell you, I want to tell you.’ So I was sitting on the toilet, and she was like, ‘Oh my gosh, you are so pregnant!’”

– Angelica, 19

“I was at home in the restroom. … After looking at the results, I went to my room, and I just cried the whole time because I didn’t know how to tell my parents. … I told one of my friends first, then I told my baby’s dad.”

– Mariana, 17
Who: Friends & Partners

“She showed it to me, and it had a smiley face. So my thought, the smiley face meant I was supposed to be smiling. I thought that the smiley face meant that she wasn’t pregnant, because for some reason that’s what I thought. She tells me that it meant that she was pregnant, and at that point my whole world stopped.”

– Dao-Ho, 16

“It had one red line, and the other was, like, pink. So I was like, ‘What is it trying to say?’ So I go show my sister. … She was like, ‘She’s pregnant, stupid.’”

– Juan, 16

Who: Other Adults

• 4 participants told partner’s parents or family
• 1 told a teacher
• 1 went to a crisis pregnancy center

Marisol, 13, told her cousin, boyfriend, boyfriend’s mom, a teacher, and a school nurse before telling her own mom: “[My boyfriend’s] mom was the first one that we turned to. I actually called her – he didn’t want to call her. … The closest adult at the time was my dance teacher. When I told her, she kind of looked at me like, ‘Are you for real? Are you really telling me this?’”

Who: Parents First

“The night that I found out, her mom and her sister came into my house at like 9:00 at night and told me that I was going to be a dad, that she was pregnant. … My moms and my pops, they found out that night because I went ahead and told them. I was standing at the door talking to [her family], I couldn’t have been like, ‘I don’t know who that was, they had the wrong house!’”

– Ricardo, 16

“As I started ignoring her, she tells our mutual friends that she’s pregnant. She starts to let everybody know she’s pregnant. … Eventually the pressure of my peers coming to talk to me and the pressure of everybody telling me this started weighing on me. So I figured if she is pregnant with my child, I should definitely let my mom know out of my mouth, instead of a third party.”

– Diego, 17

Theme 3: How Parents Found Out

How Parents Learned About Pregnancy

Numbers do not reflect reveals of second pregnancies (including one “accidental reveal”) or nature of “second reveals” in cases when pregnancy was revealed to father separately from mother.
How Parents Find Out: Summary

• Teens rarely told parents right away, absent outside pressure
• Often teens told a parent once they were compelled to do so, such as when they could no longer hide the pregnancy
• Some teens never told parents at all—parents figured it out on their own or were told by someone else
• When teens did tell parents, some still employed strategies of resistance, e.g., writing a letter or telling parents when they were distracted
• Even after telling their mother, many teens still resisted telling their father

How: Right Away, No Outside Pressure

“I couldn’t keep it to myself. I had to tell my mom. … I wanted a baby shower, I wanted people to be happy—and people were not happy. … My mom—she had this look on her face as if someone had shot me.”

—Angelica, 19

“I said, ‘Well, when are you gonna tell your parents?’ She said, ‘Well, I’m not gonna tell them till a couple of months.’ … I was like, ‘Well, I’m gonna tell my parents tonight, and I suggest you do the same thing.’”

—Juan, 16

How: Compelled to Tell

“His mom found out, before I was ready to tell anyone. And that made everything escalate. Everything blew up, because then my mom had to know.”

—Cyiarra, 21

“Nobody else in the world could have known except for me, but I could see it, and I was like, ‘Oh no, they’re gonna see!’ … Anyways, I told [my mom] because I was scared she was going to notice.”

—Ellen, 17

“[The school nurse] said, ‘Either you go home and tell your mom you’re pregnant tonight, or tomorrow we can have a meeting with her, me, the principal, and you, and let her know.’”

—Marisol, 14

How: Third Party

“My parents found out through my friends that I was pregnant because they were very concerned. So they went and told my parents for me. And I felt really bad—it was my responsibility to let them know.”

—Eva, 20

“My sister—my oldest sister—she knew about it. I don’t know how she knew about it. So she told my parents.”

—Anita, 15
How: Parents as Detectives

“My mom, ... she actually came up to me on my 17th birthday, and she asked me if I was pregnant. I told her yes because I couldn’t hide it anymore.”

– Teresa, 17

“My mom confronted me and told me, ‘You’re pregnant.’ I was like, ‘No, how do you know?’ I was still in denial.”

– Kasandra, 17

“Unlike most moms who figure it out first, she probably knew, but wanted me to tell her first. But my dad was the one to ask me. I didn’t know yet, so I told him no.”

– Jada, 18

How: Strategies of Resistance

“I ended up telling her when she was about to go to sleep, and she had taken her medication, and she was watching her soap operas. ... So I’m like, ‘Ok, I’m gonna wait for her to doze off, and you know, let that do the trick, and she won’t even notice that I’m telling her that right now.’”

– Marisol, 14

“My mom, she’s a real short Mexican lady, but when she gets angry, she likes to throw shoes and whatever she can get her hands on. ... I decided to tell her when she’s driving, so that when she gets mad she can’t hit me.”

– Diego, 17

How: Accidental Reveal

“I was like, ‘Mom, how did y’all know? I didn’t know that you guys knew.’ And she looked at me, and she was like, ‘What? What are you talking about? And I’m like, ‘Didn’t you just say you know that I’m pregnant?’ And she was like, ‘No! And oh my God, all hell broke loose.’”

– Marisol, 15 (second pregnancy)

“I lifted my shirt so he [my brother] could see my belly button popped out. I turned around, and I was like, ‘Ew! Look at! Ew!’ trying to gross my brother out, and it’s my stepdad standing at the door. I, like, ran upstairs, freaking out. ‘No, he can’t know, he can’t know! Oh my God!’”

– Veronica, 16

How: Father Knows Last

| Which Parent Learned First? | Unknown, 3 | Both parents, 7 | Mother first, 17 |
How: Father Knows Last

“I told my mom first because it’s just a lot easier to talk to her about boys and sex and stuff like that. Me and my dad never had that type of relationship where we talked about boys. We were close, but we didn’t talk about boys. I was like his little girl. So my mom ended up telling my dad.”

— Mariana, 17

“My mom found out, and she kept it a secret, and my dad found out because this lady told him when my mom told her.”

— Angelica, 19

“Once those two days passed, the first words that came out of [my mother’s] mouth was, ‘Have you told your dad?’ I was like, ‘No—imagine how he’s gonna take it if you stopped talking to me.’”

— Teresa, 17

Conclusion

• Teens are ill-prepared not just to deal with pregnancy but to access the social support they need
• Telling a partner or peer about a pregnancy or pregnancy suspicion is not always a step toward taking responsibility for the situation.
• Educational practices should include information about:
  • Biology of early pregnancy and necessary medical care
  • Behavioral changes necessary during that time
  • Importance of reaching out for help
  • How to help a friend or partner who reaches out