

SCIENCE

Number 2 June 2003

Says: The Case for the Cautious Generation

There is increasing evidence that suggests teens are taking a more cautious attitude toward sex. Using data from several nationally representative surveys, this “Science Says” research brief provides evidence of this trend and offers recommendations to those who work with teens, to policymakers, and to parents.

Teens report less sex. The percentage of high school students (grades 9-12) who report that they have had sexual intercourse declined from 54 percent in 1991 to 46 percent in 2001. The percentage of high school boys who have had sex declined steadily from 57 percent in 1991 to 49 percent in 2001 while

the proportion of high school girls who have had sex decreased from 51 to 43 percent during the same time period.¹

Many teens wish they had waited. A 2002 National Campaign survey indicates that almost two-thirds (63 percent) of adolescents aged 12-19

who have had sex wish they had waited longer. For younger teens the number is even higher — 81% of sexually experienced young people aged 12-14 wish they had waited longer to have sex.² In addition, nearly eight out of ten (79%) of young people aged 12-19 do *not* think it is embarrassing for teens to admit they are virgins.³

FIGURE 1: Percentage of Teens Grades 9–12 Who Reported Having Had Sexual Intercourse, 1991 and 2001

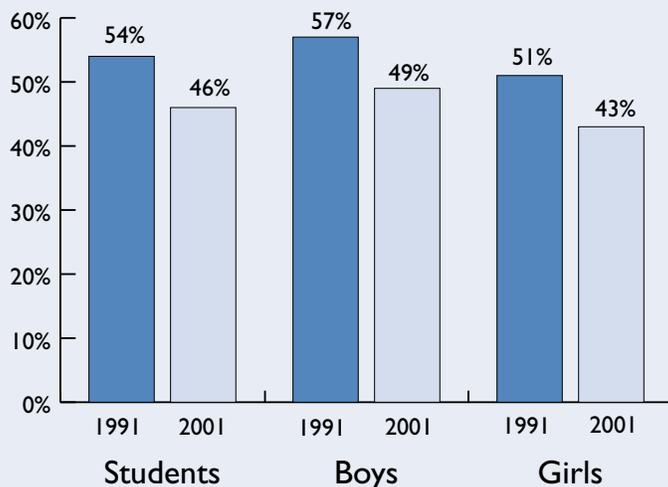
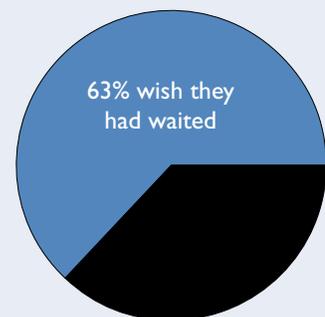


FIGURE 2: Sexually Experienced Adolescents Aged 12–19 Who Wish They Had Waited Longer to Have Sex



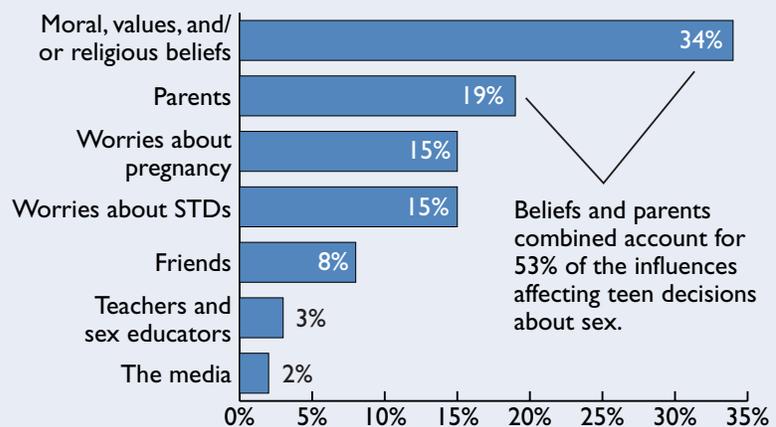
Young people overwhelmingly say parents and their own morals, values, and religious beliefs have the most influence on their decisions about sex. Over half (53%) of those aged 12-19 surveyed recently reported that parents, morals, values, and/or religious beliefs influenced their decisions about sex the most. By contrast, few teens said friends (8%), the media (2%), or teachers and sex educators (3%) most influenced their decisions about sex.⁴

Teens to parents: Let's talk. Over two-thirds of teens aged 12-19 (69%) surveyed recently said it would be much easier for them to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents. This was true for younger teens aged 12-14 (79%) and those aged 15-19 (63%).⁵

Teens to peers: Speak out. Nine out of ten young people (aged 12-19) said that it would be a lot easier for teens to delay sex if other teens spoke positively about not having sex. Research supports this belief — a teen who believes his or her friends are sexually active is more likely to initiate sex, and is less likely to do so if he or she believes that peers are not sexually active.⁶

Many young people disapprove of casual sex. Most adolescents aged 12-19 (82%) surveyed recently said that sex should only occur in a long-term committed relationship. Only 19% of this age group said that it is “all right to have sex if two people have known each other for a short time.”⁷ The percentage of college freshmen that agreed with this statement declined from 52% in 1987 to 42% in 2001.⁸

FIGURE 3: Factors That Influence Teen Decisions About Sex



What it all means

This research has several possible implications for teen pregnancy prevention and youth program leaders, policymakers, parents and other caring adults (teachers, coaches, faith leaders, etc), including:

- **Advocates.** Teens need accurate information about what their peers are doing (or not doing) because what they *think* other teens are doing has an impact on their behavior. Young people need to understand that not everyone is “doing it” and that many teens who are sexually active wish they had waited longer. Sexually experienced teens should also be reminded that they can always say “no,” even if they have said “yes” before.
- **Teens.** Young people should be candid with each other. To the extent they feel comfortable, teens who are abstinent should be encouraged to speak about their choices so that their peers

will not so often overestimate the level of sexual activity around them. Again, research makes clear that teens are less likely to initiate sex if they believe their peers are not sexually active. Sexually active teens who are careful users of contraception should speak out also so that the use of contraception is not so mysterious or surrounded by so much misinformation.

- **Parents and adults.** The survey data presented here and research conducted by other investigators suggests that parents — whether they believe it or not — influence their children’s decisions about sex, and those young people who are strongly “connected” to their parents are more likely to postpone intercourse, have fewer sexual partners, and use contraception consistently.⁹ Parents need to be reminded how influential they are in this area and how many opportunities they have to shape their children’s behavior. Parents should communicate their values about sex,

love, and relationships early and often and recognize that young people want more than just the “body parts” conversation.

About Putting What Works to Work

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the Campaign translates research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the Science Says series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

For more information, please visit www.teenpregnancy.org

Funding information

This research brief was supported by Grant Number U88/CCU322139-01 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.

About the National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan initiative supported largely by private donations. The Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. Our goal is to reduce the rate of teen pregnancy by one-third between 1996 and 2005.

Source information

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4. Ibid.

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