

## Says: Parental Influence and Teen Pregnancy

Despite what parents may think, they have an enormous influence on their children's decisions about sex. More than two decades of high quality research, supplemented by recent public opinion polls, point to the same conclusion: the quality of parents' relationships with their teenagers can make a real difference in the decisions that their children make about sex.<sup>1</sup> This Science Says brief makes the case that — even in a culture that bombards young people with conflicting and often-confusing messages about sex and pregnancy — parents remain powerful. This brief compiles much of what is known from research about parental influence and offers parents and others suggestions for how to help children delay sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy.

### What Research Shows

#### Relationships matter most.

Overall closeness between parents and their children, shared activities, parental presence in the home, and parental caring, support, and concern are all associated with a reduced risk of early sex and teen pregnancy. Teens who feel closely connected to their parents 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.<sup>2</sup>

**The importance of attitudes and values.** Children whose parents are clear about the value of delaying sex are less likely to have intercourse at an early age. Parents who discuss contraception are also more likely to have children who use contraception when they become sexually active.<sup>3</sup>

*The overall strength and closeness of parent/child relationships seems to be the best protection of all.*

#### The importance of parental supervision.

Teens whose parents supervise them and monitor their behavior are more likely to be older when they first have sex, to have fewer partners, to use contraception, and to be less at-risk for pregnancy. However, overly strict, authoritarian monitoring is actually associated with a *greater* risk of teen pregnancy,<sup>4</sup> so parents need to strike a balance.

#### The influence of parents and peers.

Teens say that parents influence their decisions about sex more strongly than do friends and other sources. When asked who most influences their sexual deci-

sions, 45 percent of teens say parents. Only 31 percent say friends are most influential, six percent cite teachers and sex educators, seven percent say religious leaders, and four percent say the media most influences their decisions about sex. Meanwhile, adults appear to overestimate the influence of peers and underestimate their own — only 32 percent of adults believe parents most influence teens' decisions about sex, while 48 percent believe friends are most influential.<sup>5</sup>

**Family structure.** Family structure, income, and where a family lives are also related to the risk of

*Teens say parents most influence their decisions about sex. But adults think that teens are most influenced by friends.*

teen pregnancy. Children in single-parent families and teens with older brothers and sisters who are sexually active or who have been pregnant or given birth are more likely to be sexually active at an early age. Those teens living in neighborhoods beset by poverty, unemployment, and high crime rates are more likely to start having sex early, fail to use contraception, and become pregnant or cause a pregnancy.<sup>6</sup> Yet these are not the most significant reasons why teens begin having sex at an early age.<sup>7</sup>

**Overall risky behavior.** Close parent-child relationships not only help protect young people from early sex and pregnancy, they also help teens avoid other such risky behaviors as violence, substance and alcohol use, and school failure.<sup>8</sup>

**Parents are often in the dark.** Many parents are not aware that their adolescent children have had sex. Only about a third of parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds believe that their child has had sex.<sup>9</sup> Half of parents of sexually experienced 8th to 11th graders are aware that their sons and daughters have started having sex.<sup>10</sup>

*Most parents of sexually experienced children are unaware that their teenage children have had sex.*

**Dating and age differences.** Research supports what common sense suggests: Two of the most powerful risk factors for early sex and pregnancy are, 1) close romantic attachments, and 2) significant

age differences (three years or more) between partners. Young adolescents are particularly vulnerable. Romantic relationships between young teens, and one-on-one dating with an age difference of three years or more, significantly increase the risk of early sexual activity.<sup>11</sup>

*Among those aged 12–14:*

- 13 percent of same-age relationships include sexual intercourse*
- 26 percent of relationships where the partner is two years older include sex*
- 33 percent of relationships where the partner is three or more years older include sex<sup>12</sup>*

**Abuse and neglect.** Young people who grow up in abusive families (physical, sexual, and emotional) are more likely to be sexually active and not to use contraception consistently,<sup>13</sup> although there are limitations in the research on this topic.<sup>14</sup> Evidence also suggests that a significant number of teen mothers are in violent, abusive, or coercive relationships just before, during, or after pregnancy.<sup>15</sup>

**Abstinence and contraception.** Public opinion shows support for both abstinence and contraception for young people. The overwhelming majority of adults and teens believe that young people should be given a very strong message to

abstain from sex until they are at least out of high school. At the same time, most adults and teens believe that teens should be given more information about abstinence *and* contraception rather than one or the other.<sup>16</sup>

*Stressing abstinence to teens while also providing them with information about contraception is not viewed as a “mixed message.” Seven in ten adults and eight in ten teens view such a message as “clear and specific.”<sup>17</sup>*

**Boys and girls.** Six out of ten teens (59 percent) believe that teen boys often receive the message that sex and pregnancy are no big deal.<sup>18</sup>

## What it all means

The research presented here has clear implications for parents, policymakers, and those working with young people and parents.

**Parent/Child relationships matter most of all.** Parents who (1) clearly communicate their values and expectations to their children, (2) express their concerns and love for them early and often, and (3) exercise supervision — including their child’s selection of friends and role models — raise children who are more likely to avoid early sexual activity, pregnancy, and parenthood than those parents who do not. Research supports the conclusion that the overall strength and

closeness of parent/child relationships seems to be the best protection of all.<sup>19</sup>

**Talking is not enough.** It is important for parents to discuss sex, love, and relationships directly with their children. Teens make it clear that they want to hear from their parents on these topics, even if they don't always act like it. However, simply talking with their teens about the risks of early sex and pregnancy is not enough. Parents need to become heavily involved in their children's lives in order to delay first sex, increase contraceptive use, or decrease the risk of pregnancy.<sup>20</sup>

**Use the media.** Many parents say that they want to have discussions with their children about sex, love, values, and relationships but find starting such conversations awkward at best. Parents should consider using television, radio, movies, music videos, and magazines as prompts. In the media, sex often has no meaning, abstinence and contraception are mentioned rarely if at all, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few characters having sex seem to be married or even especially committed to each other. Tell your children what you think about these messages and ask what they think about them. If certain programs or movies offend you, say so, and explain why. Encourage your kids to think critically; ask them what they think about the programs they watch, the magazines they read, and the music they listen to.

**Adults support an “abstinence-first” approach.** Policymakers and program leaders developing or running programs for youth should note that the majority of American

adults support an abstinence-first approach. This approach stresses abstinence as the first — and best — option for teens but also strongly advocates giving young people contraceptive information and services.

**Make boys and young men part of the equation.** As noted above, a majority of teens believe that boys often receive the message that sex and pregnancy are not a big deal. This suggests that a “double standard” — one that encourages girls to abstain from sex while offering teen boys a wink and a nod — may be alive and well. Those concerned about adolescent pregnancy must expand their efforts to reach boys and young men and parents must be direct with their male children about respect for girls and women, responsibility, and expected standards of behavior.

**Recognize the connection between adolescent pregnancy and abuse.** Efforts currently underway to inform and educate practitioners and policymakers about the connection between physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and teen pregnancy should be extended and strengthened.

**For more information.** Much of the information in this research brief is adapted from the National Campaign publication, *Parent Power: What Adults Need to Know and Do to Help Prevent Teen Pregnancy* (available at [www.teenpregnancy.org/parent](http://www.teenpregnancy.org/parent)). *Parent Power* is divided into three sections: (1) what research says about parental influence, (2) what teens want parents to know about preventing teen pregnancy, and (3) tips for parents.

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## About the Putting What Works to Work project

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, user-friendly briefs

**For more information, please visit [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)**

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### About the National Campaign

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization 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.

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### Author information

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## Endotes

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