

**Says:** **Characteristics of Teens' First Sexual Partner**

Even though about half of all high school students in the U.S. have had sexual intercourse, relatively little is known about the characteristics of teens' first sexual relationships. This Science Says research brief fills in some of these knowledge gaps by providing information about the following:

1. How teens meet their first sexual partners.
2. The types of intimate things teens do and don't do before having sexual intercourse for the first time, and
3. Teens' likelihood of discussing contraception with their partner before having sex for the first time.

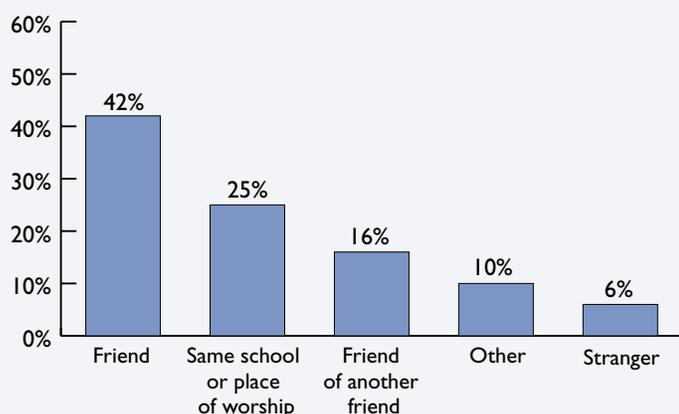
Using national data on teens in grades 7-12, this research brief presents information by gender, race/ethnicity, and age. Readers should note that all the differences reported in this brief (for example, differences in answers between males and females) are considered statistically significant.

**How Teens Met Their Partners**

Not surprisingly, many sexually experienced adolescents in this group of 7th-12th graders were friends with their first sexual partner before they had sex (Figure 1). (Readers should note that respondents' could choose more than one answer to the question, "in what ways did you know your partner before your romantic relationship?" For the purpose of this analysis, respondents' answers were then put into one of the following five categories, friends, school or place of worship, friend of a friend, other, or stranger.)<sup>1</sup>

■ More than two in five (42%) sexually experienced adolescents report that they were already

**FIGURE 1: How Teens in Grades 7-12 Met Their First Sexual Partner**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

friends with their first sexual partner before their sexual relationship began.

■ One-quarter met their first partner at their school or place of worship.

- For another sixteen percent of sexually experienced teens, their initial connection to their first partner was as a “friend of a friend.”
- Few teens (6%) said their first sexual partner was a stranger at the beginning of the relationship, or that they met through some “other” means (10%).

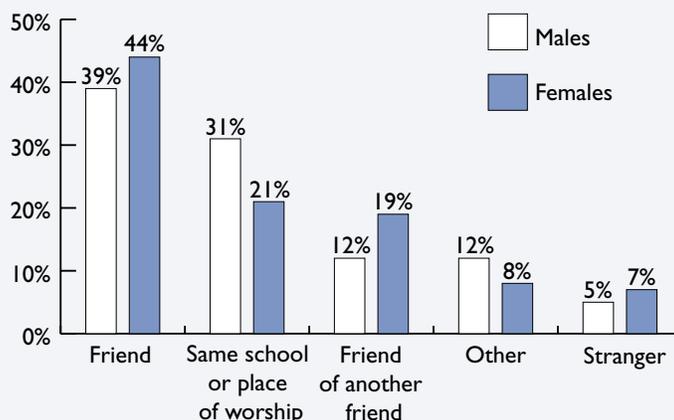
When asked how they met their first sexual partner, most boys and girls (39% and 44% respectively) said they were “friends.” However, there are some gender differences in how boys and girls met their first sexual partner. (Figure 2).

- Boys are more likely than girls to have met their first sexual partner at school or place of worship

(31% versus 21%). Girls were more likely than boys to report that their first sexual partner was

a friend of a friend (19% versus 12%).

**FIGURE 2: How Teens in Grades 7-12 Met Their First Sexual Partner, by Gender**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

### Couple-like Behavior

- *Going out together in a group*
- *Going out together alone*
- *Meeting their partner's parents*
- *Thinking of themselves as a couple*
- *Telling others they were a couple*
- *Spending less time with friends, more time with partners*
- *Exchanging presents*
- *Exchanging “I love you’s”*

### Couple-like Behavior

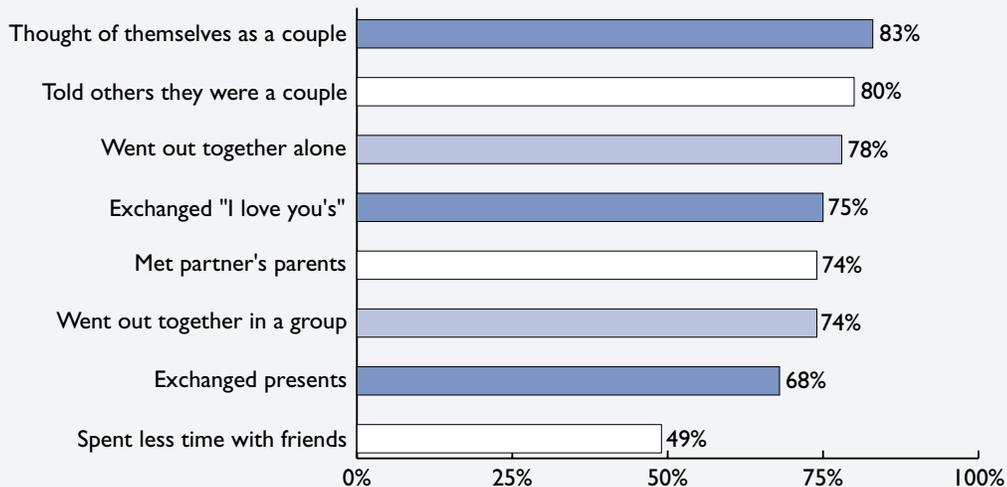
Teens were likely to participate in quite a bit of “couple-like” behavior with their partners before having sex for the first time (Figure 3), including going out together in a group, going out together alone, meeting their partner’s parents, thinking of themselves as a couple, telling others they were a couple, spending less time with friends in order to spend more time with the partner, exchanging presents, and exchanging “I love you’s.”

- At least two-thirds of teens report that they had done all of these behaviors (except spending less time with friends) with their

partner before the first time they had sex. On average, sexually experienced teens had done almost six out of eight of these behaviors before having sex for the first time.

- Thinking of themselves as a couple (83%) and telling others they were a couple (80%) were the most common behavior reported among those teens who had had sex. Fewer teens (49%) said they spent less time with friends because of their relationship with their partner, for example, or exchanged presents (68%).

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 Reporting Certain Kinds of Couple-Like Behavior in First Sexual Relationship (and before intercourse)**

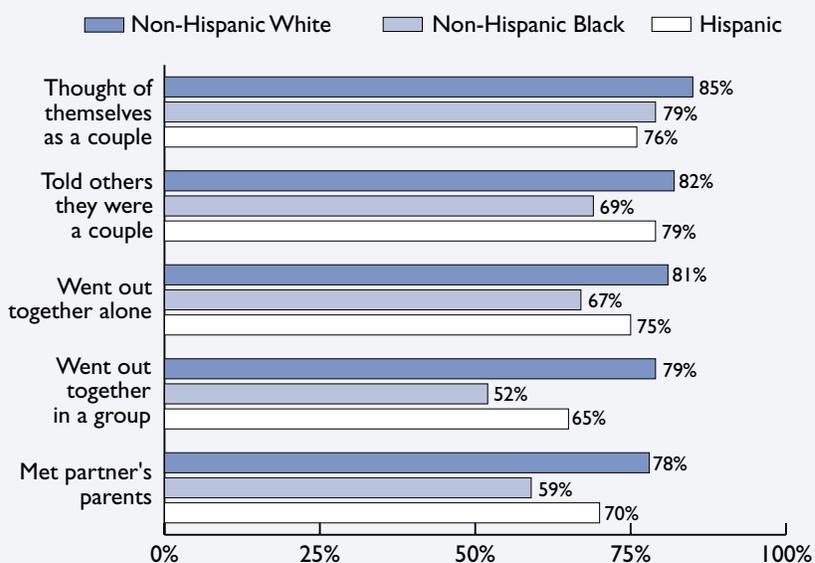


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

Among sexually experienced teens, Blacks report fewer couple-like behaviors before having sex for the first time than non-Hispanic whites or Hispanics (Figure 4).

- Compared to both non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics, black teens were less likely to tell others they were a couple, go out together alone, go out together in a group, or meet their partner's parents.
- Black teens were also less likely than non-Hispanic whites, but not Hispanics, to think of themselves as a couple.

**FIGURE 4: Percentage of Teens Grades 7-12 Reporting Certain Kinds of Couple-Like Behavior in First Sexual Relationship, by Race/Ethnicity**

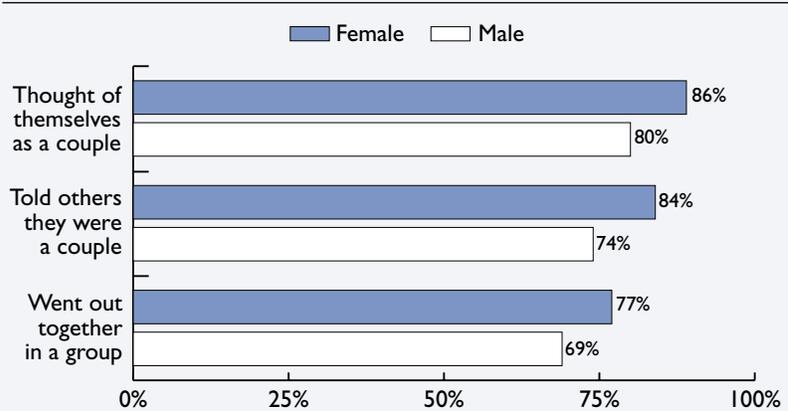


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

Boys report fewer couple-like behaviors than do girls (Figure 5).

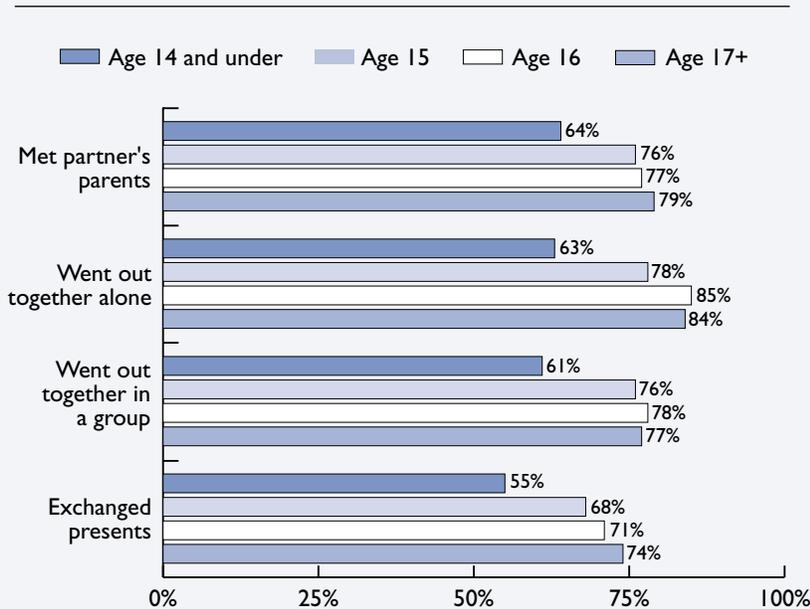
- Before having sex for the first time, boys were less likely than girls to think of themselves as part of a couple (80% versus 86%), to tell others they were a couple (74% versus 84%), or to go out with their partner in a group (69% versus 77%).

**FIGURE 5: Percentage of Teens Grades 7-12 Reporting Certain Kinds of Couple-Like Behavior in First Sexual Relationship, by Gender**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

**FIGURE 6: Percentage of Teens Grades 7-12 Reporting Certain Kinds of Couple-Like Behavior in First Sexual Relationship, by Age at First Sex**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

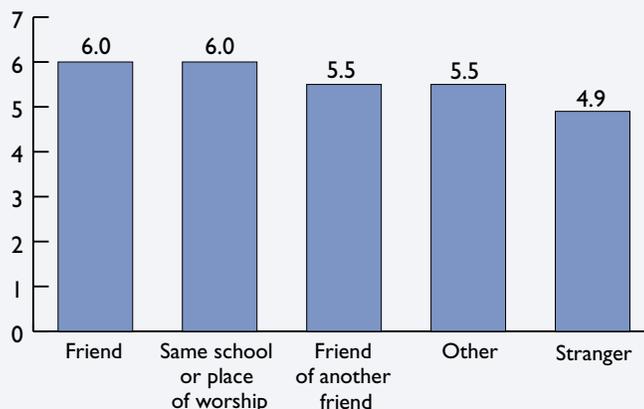
Couple-like activities are less common among teens who had their first sexual relationship at a very early age (age 14 or younger) than among those who waited until they were older to have sex (Figure 6).

- Less than two-thirds of teens who first had sex at age 14 or younger reported meeting their partner's parents (64%), going out together alone (63%), or going out together in a group (61%). By contrast, more than three-quarters of teens in all other older age groups reported these activities.
- Just over half (55%) of sexually-experienced 14-year-olds exchanged presents with their first sexual partner before the first time they had sex, compared to more than two-thirds of older teens.

Teens who knew their partner better before the start of the relationship were more likely to engage in couple-like activities before having sex for the first time (Figure 7).

- Teens who were friends with their partner before their relationship began report, on average, six couple-like activities before first sexual intercourse, compared to only five couple-like activities for those who were strangers at the beginning of the relationship.

**FIGURE 7: Average Number of Pre-Sexual Couple-Like Activities by How Teens Met Their First Partner**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

## Intimate Behavior

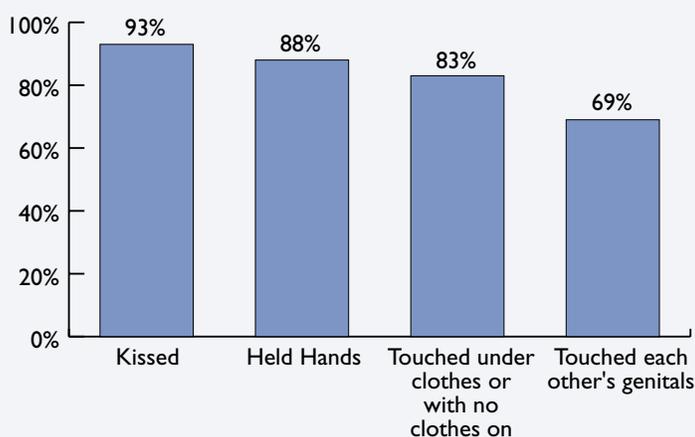
Before having sexual intercourse for the first time, the vast majority of sexually experienced adolescents report other intimate behavior with their partners, such as kissing, holding hands, and intimate touching (Figure 8).

- Most sexually experienced teens had kissed (93%), held hands with (88%), and/or touched their first sexual partner under

his/her clothes or with no clothes on (83%) before they ever had sex.

- A smaller percentage (69%) reported that they had touched their partner's genitals before the first time they had sex.

**FIGURE 8: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 Reporting Selected Intimate Behaviors in First Sexual Relationship**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

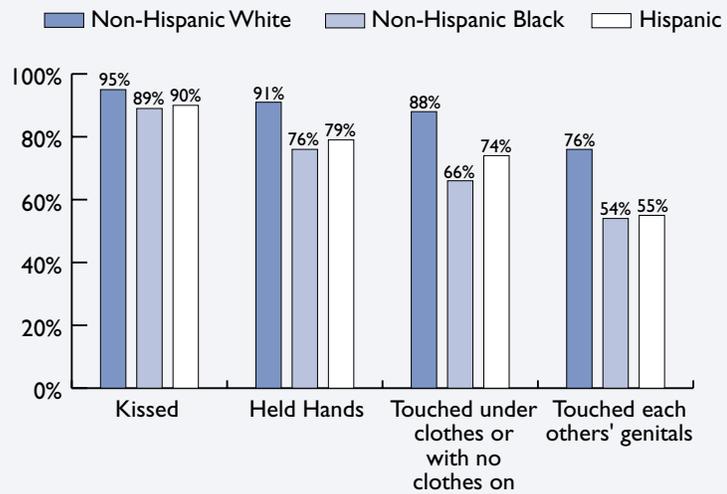
### “Intimate” Behavior

- *Kissing*
- *Holding hands*
- *Intimate touching*

Sexually experienced non-Hispanic white teens are more likely than both non-Hispanic blacks and Hispanics to report intimate behavior with their partner (Figure 9).

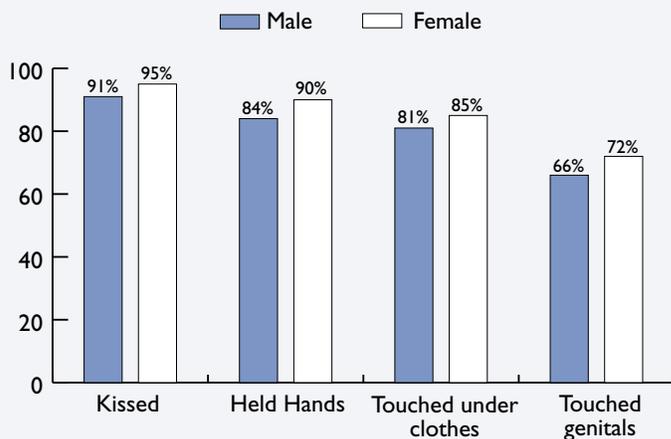
- More than three-quarters (76%) of non-Hispanic white teens touched their partner's genitals before the first time they had sexual intercourse, compared to only 54% for non-Hispanic blacks and 55% for Hispanics.

**FIGURE 9: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 Reporting Selected Intimate Behaviors in First Sexual Relationship, by Race/Ethnicity**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

**FIGURE 10: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 Reporting Selected Intimate Behaviors in First Sexual Relationship, by Gender**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

When it comes to intimate behavior before intercourse, there are small but significant differences between boys and girls (Figure 10). Sexually experienced girls, compared to boys, report a slightly greater amount of kissing (95% versus 91%), hand-holding (90% versus 84%), touching under clothes (85% versus 81%), and genital-touching (72% versus 66%).

## Discussion of Contraception Before First Intercourse

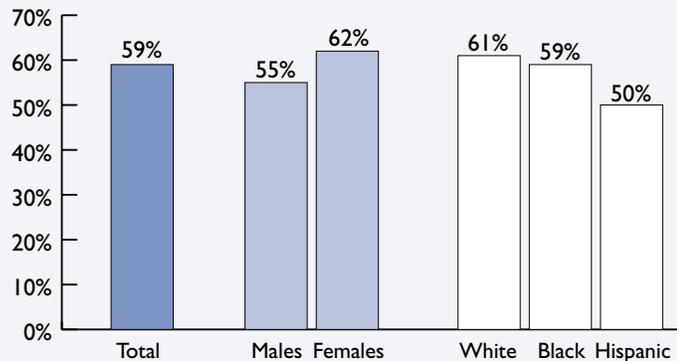
A substantial proportion (40%) of teens *never* talked about contraception with their partner before having sex for the first time (Figure 11).

- More girls than boys report pre-intercourse conversations about contraception with their first sexual partner (62% versus 55%).
- Hispanic teens (50%) were less likely than either non-Hispanic whites (61%) or non-Hispanic blacks (59%) to discuss contraception with their partner before having sex for the first time.

Teens who had more couple-like and intimate exchanges with their first sexual partners before intercourse were also more likely to discuss contraception before having sex with that partner for the first time (Figures 12 and 13).

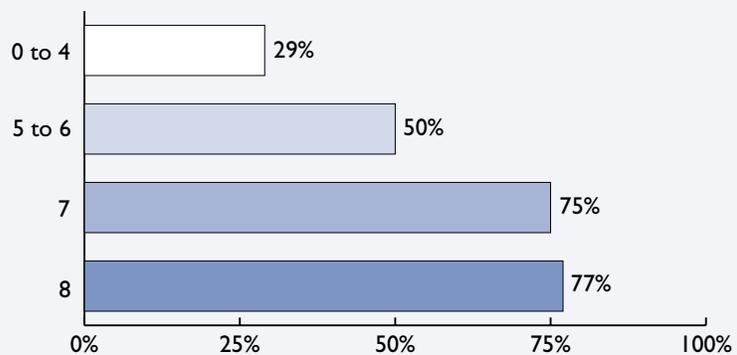
- The likelihood of discussing contraception increased with the number of “couple-like” behaviors that teens and their first sexual partners reported before having sex. While only 29% of teens reporting 0-4 couple-like behaviors said they discussed contraception with their partners before first intercourse, three-quarters of teens reporting 7 or 8 such activities discussed contraception before first sex.

**FIGURE 11: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 who Discussed Contraception Before Initiating Sex, by Race/Ethnicity and Gender**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

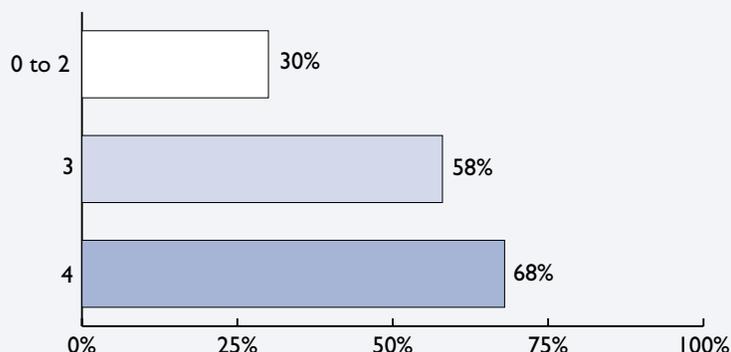
**FIGURE 12: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 who Discussed Contraception Before Initiating Sex by Number of Pre-Sexual “Couple-Like” Activities**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

- Teens who engaged in fewer intimate activities with their partners were less likely than those who reported a greater number of intimate activities to discuss contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time. Only 30% of teens who reported 0-2 intimate behaviors said they discussed contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time, compared to 68% of those who engaged in all four intimate activities.

**FIGURE 13: Percentage of Teens in Grades 7-12 who Discussed Contraception Before Initiating Sex by Number of Pre-Sexual Intimate Activities**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, 1995 and 1996

## What It All Means

Although some media reports have focused on teens engaging in casual sex with partners they hardly know, this research brief paints a different picture. Consider the following:

- The overwhelming majority of teens say they had done a number of couple-like activities (going out together alone, meeting their partner's parents, telling others they were a couple, etc) before the first time they had sex.
- Very few teens say their first sexual partner was a stranger.
- Most teens describe their first sexual partners as a friend, meet their first sexual partners through their current network of friends, or at least attend the same school or place of worship (or some combination of the previous).
- Previous research by Child

Trends indicates that fully 85 percent of teens viewed the relationship with their first sexual partner as romantic in nature.<sup>2</sup>

This research also makes clear that an alarming percentage of teens do not even discuss contraception before having sex for the first time. Fully 40% of teens *never* talked about contraception with their partner before having sex for the first time.

**Message to Parents.** This research follows up on the common-sense conclusion of other studies: teens who have a regular dating partner are more likely to have sex than teens who are not dating regularly. Many aspects of “dating” are quite public or observable. For example, eight out of 10 sexually experienced teens told others that they were a couple, 78% reported that they went out together alone, and almost three-quarters reported that they

had met their partner's parents. So, parents *should* be aware that their teens have a steady dating partner and that sexual intercourse may well become part of that relationship. Those parents whose teens are in serious romantic relationships should encourage their children to communicate honestly with them about their relationships in order to help avoid potentially risky situations. Strong parent-teen relationships, effective communication about sex and related topics, and monitoring teens' behavior are all ways that parents can help reduce the likelihood that their teenage children will engage in early and unprotected sex.

**Message to Program Providers.** Other research has demonstrated a link between discussions about contraception and a greater likelihood of using contraception. This research indicates that a significant minority of sexually experienced

teens (four in 10) did not discuss contraception before having sex for the first time. Clearly, it is important to strongly encourage teens to discuss contraception *before* having sex.

**Groups at Special Risk.** This research also shows that some groups of teens may be in riskier sexual relationships than others. For example, those teens who report fewer “couple-like” and less “intimate” activities before intercourse were least likely to discuss contraception with their sexual partners. This suggests that teens in more casual, perhaps less communicative relationships may be less focused on contraception, or less able to address the topic. Other subgroup differences to note include the following:

- **Race/ethnicity differences:** African American teens are less likely than non-Hispanic whites or Hispanics to report couple-like behaviors such as going out together alone or in a group,

meeting their partner’s parents, or telling others they are a couple — all of which suggests they may be involved in relationships that are less committed than other teens and at a greater risk of *not* using contraception. Also, Hispanic teens are less likely than non-Hispanic whites or Blacks to discuss contraception with their sexual partners, which places them at a greater risk of unprotected sex.

- **Gender differences:** Boys report fewer couple-like activities than girls, which may mean that they have less romantic views of sexual relationships than do their female partners. Boys are also less likely to discuss contraception with their partners before having sex for the first time and may be less vigilant about using contraception.
- **Age differences:** Teens who first have sex at an early age (14 and younger), are less likely to report such couple-like behavior as

going out together alone or in a group, meeting their partner’s parents, or exchanging presents. Again, this indicates that they may be involved in relationships that involve less overall communication and are less committed than those of other teens — which, in turn is linked to less discussion of contraception.

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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 will translate 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.

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## Author Information

This *Science Says* brief is based on research conducted by Child Trends. The authors of this *Science Says* research are Suzanne Ryan, Kerry Franzetta and Jennifer Manlove, Child Trends.

## Source information

All data are taken from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health) Waves 1 and 2. Add Health is a nationally representative, school-based survey of adolescents who were in grades 7 through 12 in the United States in 1995 (see Bearman, Jones, & Udry, 1997). In 1995 (Wave I), more than 20,700 students and their parents completed comprehensive in-home interviews, answering detailed questions about a wide range of health behaviors, friendship networks, romantic partners, and relationships with parents. Approximately 14,700 students were re-interviewed in 1996 (Wave II). The sample

for these figures includes respondents who reported they had sexual intercourse for the first time in the twelve months preceding the Wave 1 interview or in the months between the Wave 1 and 2 interviews. The sample is further restricted to include only those respondents who provide information about their first sexual partner; have never been married, and have non-missing data for key variables, including sampling weights. Our final sample consists of 1,909 respondents aged 12-20 in 1995.

## 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.

## About Child Trends

Child Trends is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based information to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children. Child Trends conducted the analysis used in this fact sheet.

## 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.

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## Notes

1. For the measure of how teens met their first partner, the survey provided eight possible ways in which teens could have known their partner before the relationship began: friends, same school, same place of worship, friend of another friend, neighbors, casual acquaintances, some other way, and did not know partner before relationship began. Respondents could indicate more than one means of how they originally knew their partner; but for this analyses, these responses were pri-

oritized to create a measure with five mutually exclusive categories, listed here in order of priority: friends, same school or place of worship, friend of another friend, other, and stranger. The "other" category includes neighbors, casual acquaintances, and some other way. We prioritized teens' responses based on closeness of the connection. For example, if a teen said they met their first partner because they were friends and because they went to the same school, they were placed them in the "friends" category. If, however, the teen said

they met their first partner because they were casual acquaintances and went to the same school, they were placed them in the "same school or place of worship" category. If the only response teens gave was that they did not know their partner before the relationship began, they were placed in the "stranger" category.

2. Ryan, S, Manlove, J., & Franzetta, K. (2003). *The first time: Characteristics of teens' first sexual relationships*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.