

## Says: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents

 Few adults or teens think it is appropriate for young adolescents to have sex.<sup>1</sup> Still, a significant minority of those age 14 and younger say they have had sexual intercourse. One large data set even suggests that while the proportion of unmarried teen girls age 15-19 who have had sex declined between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of unmarried teen girls age 14 and younger who had sex increased appreciably over the same time period.<sup>2</sup> This Science Says research brief provides data on the sexual behavior of young adolescents and offers recommendations based on this research to parents, policy-makers and those who work with teens.

Readers should be aware that all of the following data is nationally-representative except where noted. For more detailed information on the sexual behavior of young adolescents, please see the National Campaign publication, *14 & Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents* ([www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)).

### What the Data Show

#### Sexual Experience

*One in five have had sex before age 15.*

- Approximately one in five adolescents has had sexual intercourse before his or her 15th birthday.
- Boys age 14 and younger are slightly more likely to have had sex than girls the same age.

#### Pregnancy

- While the number of young adolescents who get pregnant is relatively small, a significant

percentage of young adolescents who are *sexually experienced* reports having been pregnant.

- Approximately one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls reports having been pregnant.
- That translates into about 20,000 pregnancies each year and 8,000 births. (For those aged 15-19, the numbers are about 850,000 pregnancies and 450,000 births.)

*One in seven sexually experienced 14-year-olds reports having been pregnant.*

- Data released in May 2003 by the Alan Guttmacher Institute shows that between 1990 and 1999, teen pregnancy rates declined 27% for those aged 15-19. For those 14 and under, the teen pregnancy rate declined 40% (from a peak in 1990 of 17.5 per 1,000 girls to 10.5 in 1999).

*For many young adolescents, sex is sporadic.*

#### Frequency of Sex

- Approximately half of sexually experienced 14-year-olds have had sex 0-2 times in the past 12 months.

## Number of partners

*Early sexual initiation is linked to a greater number of sexual partners.*

- Of female adolescents under the age of twenty, those who first had sex at age 14 or younger had more sexual partners, on average, than females who first had sex at age 15 or older, thereby significantly increasing their risk of sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy.

## Pressure

*Many young teens feel pressure to have sex or describe it as unwanted.*

- About one in ten young women who first have sex before age 15 describes it as “non-voluntary.” Many more describe it as relatively “unwanted.” That is, while the sex was not forced, they still did not want to have sex when they did.
- Public opinion polling indicates that younger teen girls who are sexually experienced are more likely than sexually experienced older teens to say they “wish they’d waited.”<sup>3</sup>

## Contraceptive Use

*Many sexually active young adolescents do not use contraception.*

- Between half and three-quarters of youth aged 12-14 report that they used contraception the *first* time they had sex.
- Slightly more than half of girls aged 12-14 and about two thirds of boys the same age say they used some form of contraception the most *recent* time they had sex.

## Dating

*Many of those aged 12-14 report having been on a date or having a romantic relationship.*

- About half of those aged 12-14 report having been on a date or having a romantic relationship in the past 18 months.
- Among those youth 14 and younger reporting a romantic relationship, about a quarter are with someone two or more years older — girls far more than boys.
- Relationships between a young adolescent (aged 12-14) and a partner who is older by two, three or more years — compared to relationships with someone only slightly older, the same age, or younger — are much more likely to include sexual intercourse.
- For example, 13% of same-age relationships among those aged 12-14 include sexual intercourse. If the partner is two years older, 26% of the relationships include sex. If the partner is three or more years older, 33% of the relationships include sex.

## Opportunity

*Many young people have opportunities to have sex.*

- Although not nationally-representative, one data set indicates that fully one-third of 12-year-olds and about half of 14-year-olds have been at a party without any adults in the house.

## Parents

- Parents are usually unaware that their young adolescents have had sex. Only about one-third of parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds believe that their child has had sex.
- As a general matter, parents say that they talk to their children “a moderate amount” about sex. They were most likely to say they have spoken to their children about STDs and least likely to have discussed the social consequences of sex.

*Parents are generally unaware if their young adolescent children have had sex.*

- A growing body of evidence suggests that parents and youth disagree about whether conversations about sex had actually taken place and who initiated the conversation.

## Risky behavior

*Early sexual activity is linked to other risky behavior.*

- Young sexually experienced teens were more likely than virgins to engage in other risky behavior, such as smoking, using illegal drugs, and drinking once a week or more.
- For example, 43% of sexually experienced teens said they had tried marijuana, compared with 10% of virgins.

## What It All Means

**Adults need to know that for some young people, sex doesn't wait.**

This data make clear that some very young teens are having sexual intercourse. Consequently, parents, program leaders, school officials, community leaders and others need to recognize that sex and dating are important issues for middle school age youth that cannot be ignored.

**There are many reasons to be concerned about early sexual activity.**

Youth who have sex at an early age seem to be different than those who do not in important ways. Girls who first have sex before age 15 are more likely to describe it as unwanted, compared to those who wait until they are older to have sex. Over time, those girls that first have sex at an early age are more likely to have more sexual partners and are at an increased risk of pregnancy, contracting an STD, and dropping out of school.

**Early sex may be an early warning sign of other risky behavior.**

Boys and girls who have sex at an early age are more likely than their peers who haven't had sex to use illegal drugs and alcohol and engage in other troubling behavior. And while early sex may not *cause* these outcomes, it does appear to be an early and important warning sign of risk.

**Parents should be concerned about young teenagers dating, particularly dating someone much older.**

Not surprisingly, young teens who are dating are much more likely to be involved in sexual relationships. And those young adolescents who are dating someone two, three, or more years older are *far* more likely to be involved in sexual relationships than young teens who date someone the same age or slightly older. Parents should discourage early, one-on-one dating, particularly with someone significantly older.

**Parents should know where their children are, what they are doing, and with whom.**

Young teens seem to have opportunities to have sex. For example, one small-area data sex indicates that one-third of 12-year-olds and about half of 14-year-olds have been at a party without any adults in the house.

**Parents should communicate more with their young adolescents about sex, love, relationships, and values.**

A growing body of evidence suggests that parent/child "connectedness" (support, closeness, warmth) plays a critical role in delaying first intercourse and contributing to a

lower frequency of sex during adolescence.<sup>4</sup> This data suggest, however, that some parents are not talking to their children about these issues at all and that while many parents report having had such conversations, far fewer young people say that such conversations have actually occurred.

**Teaching middle school youth about how to resist and manage sexual pressure is appropriate.**

Many young teens say they feel pressure to have sex. Many find themselves in situations where they feel pressure to have sex and, because of their young age, may not be able to handle these situations effectively or appropriately.

**Efforts to prevent teen pregnancy should include young adolescents.**

These data clearly suggest that addressing sex and its consequences — as well as the benefits and limitations of contraception — cannot be put off until high school.

**We still have much to learn.**

While this information sheds light on the sexual behavior of young adolescents, it also makes clear there is still much we don't know. For example, despite numerous media reports and anecdotal information from school officials, other adults, and teens themselves, we don't reliably know how many young people are engaging in certain risky sexual behaviors like oral or anal sex. Are adolescents engaging in these activities with greater frequency, with more partners, or with more casual acquaintances than in the past? Do more young people view these sorts of behaviors as a "safe" alternative

to intercourse? We simply don't know.

This lack of adequate information is due, in part, to the worry among some that asking sexual questions of young people “legitimizes” sex, or increases teens’ interest in having sex. While there is little evidence to support this concern, these sensitivities need to be discussed and resolved openly and respectfully, otherwise we will all be limited in our ability to provide sound guidance and advice.

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## 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 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.

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

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### About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

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.

### A Note About Sources

Except where noted, the data in this research brief is based on the National Campaign Publication, *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*. The seven-chapter publication is the work of seven teams of investigators examining three nationally-representative data sets

and three smaller data sets. The findings are based on data collected, primarily, from the mid and late 1990s, the most recent nationally-representative data available. For more information, please visit [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org).

### Endnotes

1. Moore, K.A., & Stief, T.M. (1991). Changes in marriage and fertility behavior: Behavior versus attitudes of young adults. *Youth & Society*, 22(3), 362-286.
2. Terry, E., & Manlove, J. (2000). *Trends in sexual activity and contraceptive use among teens*. Washington: The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
3. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2002). *With one voice: America's adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.
4. Blum, R.W. (2002). Mothers' influence on teen sex: Connections that promote postponing sexual intercourse. Center for Adolescent Health and Development, University of Minnesota and Miller, B. (1998). *Families matter: A research synthesis of family influences on adolescent pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.