

Parents Can Make the Difference

As younger and younger preteens/teens engage in high risk sexual behavior, researchers are trying to determine what factors protect them and lessen their risks. One study after another confirms parents are the ones who can make the greatest difference in their child's sexual decisions. How do parents help their children make the best decisions? Let's take a look at what the research is saying.

- The strength and closeness of the parent-child relationship is the greatest protection of all. Kids are more likely to avoid risky behaviors if parents:
 1. clearly communicate their values and expectations
 2. express concern and love early and often
 3. exercise supervision of their child's choice of friends and role models

Stanton, B. F., & Burns, J. (2003). Sustaining and broadening intervention effects: Social norms, core values, and parents. In D. Romer (Ed.), *Reducing adolescent risk: Toward an integrated approach* (pp. 193-200). Thousand Oaks, CA. Sage Publications.

- Teens (age 12-17) were asked. "Which one of the following factors most affects your decisions about whether to have sex?" The percentage of teens who answered:
 - 39% - Your morals, values, and/or religious beliefs
 - 17% - Concern about STDs
 - 15% - Concern about pregnancy
 - 10% - Education and information about sex

They were also asked, "When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is most influential?" The percentage of teens who answered:

- 49% - Parents
- 16% - Friends
- 11% - Media

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001). *Faithful nation: What American adults and teens think about faith, morals, religion, and teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.

Are Parents Missing an Opportunity?

Although 39% of the teens cited their morals, values, and/or religious beliefs and 49% said their parents were the most influential, many parents are hesitant to talk with their children. Some parents are too late in providing the information and others are simply relying on schools to talk with their children about sex. While many sexuality education programs focus on pregnancy and STDs, very few discuss morals, values, and/or religious beliefs.

Children need to know not only the facts of life but the underlying values. And while school-based sexuality education may be technically accurate, it cannot accommodate diverse cultural and religious traditions. Children have questions that need to be answered by their parents. Don't wait. Use this web site as a resource so you can give your children the information they need.

Parents can make a big difference.

- When mothers took a firm, unequivocal line against premarital sex, had a good relationship with their teens and avoided discussing birth control, their children were highly likely to be virgins. In fact, teens who were satisfied with their relationship with their mothers were twice as likely to abstain from sexual intercourse as teens who reported a low level of satisfaction.

Jaccard, J., Dittus, P.J., & Gordon, V.V. (1996). Maternal correlates of adolescent sexual and contraceptive behavior. *Family Planning Perspectives*, 28(4),159-165.

- Teens who report high levels of parent-family connectedness and parental disapproval of being sexually active or using contraceptives were more likely to delay sexual activity.

Resnick, M. D., Bearman, P. S., Blum, R. W., Bauman, K. E., Harris, K. M., et al. (1997). Protecting adolescents from harm. Findings from the National Longitudinal Study on Adolescent Health. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 278 (10): 823-832.

- In a 2002 survey of teens age 15 to17 -
 - 91% who have not had sex agreed that what their parents taught them about sex influenced their decision not to have sex.
 - 91% agreed that respect from parents was a benefit of waiting to have sex. The Kaiser Family Foundation. (2002). *Sex smart communication: a series of national surveys of teens about sex*. Menlo Park, CA: Author.

- 53% of teens age 12 to 19 say parents or their own morals, values and religious beliefs influence their decisions about sex the most - far more than such other influences as friends, the media, teachers and sex educators.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001, 2002). *With one voice: American adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.

- A survey of teens between the ages of 12 and 19 found that:
 - 88% of teens said it would be easier to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have a "more open, honest conversations" about such issues with parents.
 - 59% of teens said their parents are their role models of "healthy, responsible relationships."

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001, 2002). *With one voice: American adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.

Why don't kids ask their parents questions about sex?

- The reasons young people age 15-17 gave for not talking with parents about sex were:
 - 83% concern about their parents' reaction
 - 78% worry parents will think they are having sex
 - 77% not knowing how to bring up the subject
 - 64% a belief that parents would not understand

The Kaiser Family Foundation. (2002). *Sex smart communication: a series of national surveys of teens about sex*. Menlo Park, CA: Author.

When should parents talk with their kids about sex?

- Although 68% of 8-11 year olds say they know kids who already have boyfriends or girlfriends and 16 % see other students kissing or making out in school and 33% of 10-11 year olds feel sexual pressures, many parents delay conversations about puberty, sex and related issues.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, Children Now, and Nickelodeon. (2001). *Kaiser Daily Reproductive Health Report*. Survey shows younger children facing increased sexual pressure. Menlo Park, CA: Authors.

- Mothers and daughters find it is easier and less contentious to talk with each other about sexuality before puberty begins. Communication about sexuality was less effective if parents waited until mid-puberty to talk with their child.

Yowell, C. M. (1997) Risks of communication: early adolescent girls' conversations with mothers and friends about sexuality. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 17: 172-196.

- HIV sexual risk prevention interventions were more effective with middle school students than high school students

Siegel, D. M., Aten, M. J., & Enaharo, M. (2001). Long term effects of a middle school – and high school – based human immunodeficiency virus sexual risk prevention intervention. *Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine*, 155 (10) 1117-1126.

Why have parent sexuality education programs?

- Close to nine out of ten adults surveyed said that although they want to talk with their children about sex, they don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2004). Fact Sheet: Teen pregnancy prevention: dads make a difference. Washington, DC: Author.

- Parents who participated in a New York-based program focusing on encouraging parent/child communication about HIV/AIDS were three times more likely to talk with their children about the virus.

The Kaiser Family Foundation. (2000). Kaiser Daily HIV/AIDS Report. HIV/AIDS Program Fosters communication Between Parents, Children. Menlo Park, CA: Authors.

- An interesting study looked at the topics Hispanic and Black mothers report discussing with sons and daughters. Look at the differences. Compare the teens' memory with what mothers said was discussed with mothers or fathers. Please note that only 25% of mothers and 22% of fathers talked with sons about physical and sexual development.

| | Mothers' report discussion | Teen Talk with Mother % girls / %boys | Teen Talk with Father % girls / %boys |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|---|
| HIV/AIDS | 92% | 81/76 | 50/57 |
| STDs | 85% | 74/66 | 34/47 |
| Condoms | 74% | 64/68 | 27/58 |
| Reproduction | 73% | 71/51 | 20/37 |
| Pressure to have sex | 71% | 67/36 | 44/32 |
| Birth Control | 65% | 57/31 | 16/30 |
| When to start having sex | 63% | 60/42 | 28/35 |
| Choosing sex partners | 58% | 53/48 | 30/36 |
| Physical/sexual development | 51% | 51/25 | 9/22 |
| Masturbation | 27% | 15/15 | 2/15 |

Miller, K. S., Kotchick, S. D., Forehand, R., & Ham, A. Y. (1998). Family communication about sex: What are parents saying and are their adolescents listening? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 30(5), 218-222 & 235.

- From a survey of young people aged 12-19:
 - Fewer than five out of ten teens strongly agreed that they are getting a clear message that teen pregnancy is wrong. (2001)

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001, 2002). *With one voice: American adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.

- In a 1992 national sample of parents,
 - 54 percent reported never talking with their child about sex
 - 28 percent said discussions rarely occurred
 - 5 percent had discussions once a year.

A significant majority of children and parents reported dissatisfaction with the quantity and quality of family discussions about sexuality issues.

Note: Many of these teens are now parents who may make the same mistakes their parents made. Parent classes may make the difference.

Warren, C. (1992). Perspectives on international sex practices and American family sex communication relevant to teenage sexual behavior in the United States. *Health Communication*. 4 (2): 121-136.

What should church or school programs include to help parents communicate with their kids about sex?

- "Consistent with research among white samples, mothers of black and Hispanic adolescents are the primary parental communicators about sexual topics. To facilitate communication, educational programs for parents should cover not only what to discuss, but how the information is conveyed."

Miller, K. S., Kotchick, B. A., Dorsey, S., Forehand, R., & Ham, A. Y. (1998). Family communication about sex: What are parents saying and are their adolescents listening? *Family Planning Perspectives*, 30 (5): 218-222 & 235.

How should parents communicate with their children about sexuality?

- Although parents want to protect their children, kids report that some lectures make them feel unheard, intruded upon, disrespected and "stupid." Parents need to learn alternative ways of communicating with their preteens.

Ginsburg, K., & Jablow, M. (2001) *But I'm almost 13!"an action plan for raising a responsible adolescent*. New York: Mc Graw Hill. .

- Parents who have a more interactive communication style with their children are more effective than parents who dominate the conversation with their children.

Lefkowitz, E. S., Kahlbaugh, P. Au, T. K. et al. (1998). A longitudinal study of AIDS conversations between mothers and adolescents. *AIDS Education and Prevention*, 10: 351-365.