

Family Tapestries Strengthening Family Bonds



Fact Sheet

Adolescents at Risk: Sexual Activity

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During adolescence, youth are experiencing physical growth and hormone changes that prompt sexual feelings. Physically, the body is developing the capacity to generate life. The sex organs are maturing and typically by the end of puberty, both males and females have the ability to procreate.

Talking to your teen about these changes and their impact may be uncomfortable, but the issue of sex should be a part of the infamous “talk” during adolescence. Kotchik (2001) reports that by the time they graduate, half of all high school students will have begun having sex. This percentage is higher for males, minority teens, and teens from lower socioeconomic households.

According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute (AGI, 2001), a small number of early teens are sexually active: two out of ten females, and three out of ten males. However, by the age of 18, 65-70% of teens report being sexually active. Females typically engage in sexual activity to express emotions related to love, while males tend to have sex for pleasure rather than emotional closeness.

Teens at Risk?

What places teens at higher risk for engaging in sexual activity? Overall, studies show that parental, developmental, and peer influences contribute to the early initiation of sexual activity.

- **Living in a single parent home.** Teens who live in single parent homes are more likely to be sexually active than those from two parent households. Parental divorce during the early teen years has also been associated with the early onset and increased frequency of sexual activity in females. These effects are often due to less monitoring and supervision that typically occurs in single parent households.

- **The influence of an older sibling.** Teens who have an older sibling (more specifically, a sister) who is sexually active or who has had a baby are more likely to begin having sex at a younger age.

- **The perception that peers are sexually active.** Studies consistently find that if a teen perceives peers to be sexually active, whether they are or not, heavily influences their decisions about sexual activity.

- **Early pubertal development.** Teens who mature physically earlier than their peers typically hang out with an older crowd. Older peers may influence the decision to begin sexual activity earlier.

- **Deviant peer groups.** Teens who associate with peers who use substances or are delinquent (e.g., skip school, take part in minor criminal activities such as shoplifting) are more likely to engage in risky sexual activity. For these youth, risk taking activities are more likely to be perceived as normal.

- **Sexual Abuse.** Teens who experienced involuntary sexual activity (e.g., sexual abuse as children) are more likely to begin having sex at an early age, typically have more sexual partners, and are less likely to use any form of protection.

- **Alcohol and drug use.** Teens who use alcohol and drugs are at greater risk for engaging in sexual activity. Consequently, these youth also are more likely to engage in unsafe sexual behaviors (e.g., unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners).

What Are the Consequences?

Teens who engage in sexual activity are at risk for a number of negative consequences including:

- **Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs).** Adolescents typically engage in short-lived relationships which make them more likely than adults to have sex with multiple

partners; this places them at greater risk for contracting STDs. In fact, 8 million cases of STDS are reported each year for individuals under the age of 25, and the highest rates of gonorrhea, syphilis, and chlamydia are found among teens aged 15-19. Despite the risk, few teens use condoms consistently.

- **Pregnancy.** Although teen birthrates have declined since 1991, the United States has the highest teen pregnancy rate among western industrialized nations. Nearly 20% of sexually active teens become pregnant each year. This translates to nearly one million 15-19 year old pregnant females each year.

- **Early parenting.** Just over half of all teen pregnancies result in live births each year. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2002) reports that on average, 200,000 of these births are to teens 17 and younger.

What Can Parents Do?

- Keep in contact with your teens and the issues surrounding their lives. Teens who believe that they have a good level of communication with their parents are less likely to engage in sexual activity.

- Be your teen's primary source of information regarding sex. There are many informal sources that can provide (frequently false) sexual information to your teens such as friends, popular magazines, the internet, and television. Teens are talking about sex—if not with you, then with someone else. Talk to your teen first about sex.

- Make “the talk” as comfortable as possible for your teen. Talking down to him or her will not encourage openness in the discussion.

- Communicate your values and your expectations for your teen's conduct with friends and on dates. Teens are flexing their “social muscles,” and are hanging out with friends more and beginning to date. Talk with your teen about suitable (and unsuitable) dating activities (e.g., flirting, kissing, petting) and appropriate ways for interacting with the opposite sex.

- Help your teen understand that all actions are based on choices with consequences. Talk about the results of irresponsible sexual behavior and why it is important to delay sex.

- How susceptible is your teen to peer pressure? Don't know? Talk about it. Most teens have sex based on the perception that their peers are doing the same thing. Ask

your teen what they value and explore how they perceive the values of their peers. Discuss how these values fit into your belief system.

Ongoing communications with your teens is important and may serve as a buffer against their participation in risk taking behavior. Discussing expectations, setting goals and clear rules, monitoring your teens (e.g., regularly “checking-in,” knowing their friends) are just a few ways that you can help your teens abstain from or engage in responsible sexual activity.

Helpful Resources

Bell, R. (1998). *Changing bodies, changing lives: A book for teens on sex & relationships*. New York: Times Books.

Eyre, L., & Eyre, R. (1998). *How to talk to your child about sex: It's best to start early, but it's never too late: A step by step guide for every age*. New York: Golden Books.

Langford, L. (1998). *The big talk: Talking to your child about sex and dating*. New York: Wiley, John & Sons, Incorporated.

Lingren, H. L. (1997). *Tune in to your teen*. University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension (www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/family/heg153.htm#pet). Retrieved from the World Wide Web March 18, 2002.

Talking With Kids About Tough Issues: <http://www.talkingwithkids.org>.

References

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Little, C. B., & Rankin, A. (2001). Why do they start it? Explaining reported early-teen sexual activity. *Sociological Forum*, 16(4), 703-729.

Maynard, R. A. (1997). *Kids having kids: Economic costs and social consequences of teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute Press.

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The Alan Guttmacher Institute: www.guttmacher.org
The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services: www.os.dhhs.gov

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