

Teen Pregnancy

Ten Tips For Parents To Help Their Children Avoid Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy has reviewed recent research about parental influences on children's sexual behavior and talked to many experts in the field, as well as to teens and parents themselves. From these sources, it is clear that there is much parents and adults can do to reduce the risk of kids becoming pregnant before they've grown up.

Presented here as "ten tips," many of these lessons will seem familiar because they articulate what parents already know from experience - like the importance of maintaining strong, close relationships with children and teens, setting clear expectations for them, and communicating honestly and often with them about important matters. Research supports these common sense lessons: not only are they good ideas generally, but they can also help teens delay becoming sexually active, as well as encourage those who are having sex to use contraception carefully. Finally, although these tips are for parents, they can be used by adults more generally in their relationships with teenagers. Parents-especially those who are single or working long hours-often turn to other adults for help in raising their children and teens. If all these caring adults are on the same "wavelength" about the issues covered here, young people are given more consistent messages.

So, What to Do?

1. Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes.

Communicating with your children about sex, love, and relationships is often more successful when you are certain in your own mind about these issues. To help clarify your attitudes and values, think about the following kinds of questions:

- What do you really think about school-aged teenagers being sexually active- perhaps even becoming parents?
- Who is responsible for setting sexual limits in a relationship and how is that done, realistically?
- Were you sexually active as a teenager and how do you feel about that now?
- Were you sexually active before you were married? What do such reflections lead you to say to your own children about these issues?
- What do you think about encouraging teenagers to abstain from sex?
- What do you think about teenagers using contraception?

2. Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific.

Kids have lots of questions about sex, and they often say that the source they'd most like to go to for answers is their parents. Start the conversation, and make sure that it is honest, open, and respectful. If you can't think of how to start the discussion, consider using situations shown on television or in movies as conversation starters. Tell them candidly and confidently what you think and *why* you take these positions; if you're not sure about some issues, tell them that, too. Be sure to have a two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture. Ask them what *they*

think and what they know so you can correct misconceptions. Ask what, if anything, worries them.

Age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in a child's life and continue through adolescence. Resist the idea that there should be just one conversation about all this - you know, "the talk." The truth is that parents and kids should be talking about sex and love all along. This applies to *both* sons and daughters and to *both* mothers and fathers, incidentally. All kids need a lot of communication, guidance, and information about these issues, even if they sometimes don't appear to be interested in what you have to say. And if you have regular conversations, you won't worry so much about making a mistake or saying something not quite right, because you'll always be able to talk again.

Many inexpensive books and videos are available to help with any detailed information you might need, but don't let your lack of technical information make you shy. Kids need as much help in understanding the *meaning* of sex as they do in understanding how all the body parts work. Tell them about love and sex, and what the difference is. And remember to talk about the reasons that kids find sex interesting and enticing; discussing only the "downside" of unplanned pregnancy and disease misses many of the issues on teenagers' minds.

Here are the kinds of questions kids say they want to discuss:

- How do I know if I'm in love? Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?
- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex? Should I wait until marriage?
- Will having sex make me popular? Will it make me more grown-up and open up more adult activities to me?
- How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?
- How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?
- How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they safe?
- Can you get pregnant the first time?

In addition to being an "askable parent," be a parent with a point of view. Tell your children what you think. Don't be reluctant to say, for example:

- I think kids in high school are too young to have sex, especially given today's risks.
- Whenever you do have sex, always use protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases until you are ready to have a child.
- Our family's religion says that sex should be an expression of love within marriage.
- Finding yourself in a sexually charged situation is not unusual; you need to think about how you'll handle it *in advance*. Have a plan. Will you say "no"? Will you use contraception? How will you negotiate all this?
- It's okay to think about sex and to feel sexual desire. Everybody does! But it's not okay to get pregnant/get somebody pregnant as a teenager.
- One of the many reasons I'm concerned about teens drinking is that it often leads to unprotected sex.

- (For boys) Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being able to wait and acting responsibly does.
- (For girls) You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship, find someone else.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex does *not* encourage them to become sexually active. And remember, too, that your own behavior should match your words. The "do as I say, not as I do" approach is bound to lose with children and teenagers, who are careful and constant observers of the adults in their lives.

3. Supervise and monitor your children and adolescents.

Establish rules, curfews, and standards of expected behavior, preferably through an open process of family discussion and respectful communication. If your children get out of school at 3 pm and you don't get home from work until 6 pm, who is responsible for making certain that your children are not only safe during those hours, but also are engaged in useful activities? Where are they when they go out with friends? Are there adults around who are in charge? Supervising and monitoring your kids' whereabouts doesn't make you a nag; it makes you a parent.

4. Know your children's friends and their families.

Friends have a strong influence on each other, so help your children and teenagers become friends with kids whose families share your values. Some parents of teens even arrange to meet with the parents of their children's friends to establish common rules and expectations. It is easier to enforce a curfew that all your child's friends share rather than one that makes him or her different-but even if your views don't match those of other parents, hold fast to your convictions. Welcome your children's friends into your home and talk to them openly.

5. Discourage early, frequent, and steady dating.

Group activities among young people are fine and often fun, but allowing teens to begin steady, one-on-one dating much before age 16 can lead to trouble. Let your child know about your strong feelings about this throughout childhood-don't wait until your young teen proposes a plan that differs from your preferences in this area; otherwise, he or she will think you just don't like the particular person or invitation.

6. Take a strong stand against your daughter dating a boy significantly older than she is. And don't allow your son to develop an intense relationship with a girl much younger than he is.

Older guys can seem glamorous to a young girl-sometimes they even have money and a car to boot! But the risk of matters getting out of hand increases when the guy is much older than the girl. Try setting a limit of no more than a two- (or at most three-) year age difference. The power differences between younger girls and older boys or men can lead girls into risky situations, including unwanted sex and sex with no protection.

7. Help your teenagers to have options for the future that are more attractive than early pregnancy and parenthood.

The chances that your children will delay sex, pregnancy, and parenthood are significantly increased if their futures appear bright. This means helping them set meaningful goals for the future, talking to them about what it takes to make future plans come true, and helping them reach their goals. Tell them, for example, that if they want to be a teacher, they will need to stay in school in order to earn various degrees and pass certain exams. It also means teaching them to use free time in a

constructive way, such as setting aside certain times to complete homework assignments. Explain how becoming pregnant-or causing pregnancy-can derail the best of plans; for example, child care expenses can make it almost impossible to afford college. Community service, in particular, not only teaches job skills, but can also put teens in touch with a wide variety of committed and caring adults.

8. Let your kids know that you value education highly.

Encourage your children to take school seriously and set high expectations about their school performance. School failure is often the first sign of trouble that can end in teenage parenthood. Be very attentive to your children's progress in school and intervene early if things aren't going well. Keep track of your children's grades and discuss them together. Meet with teachers and principals, guidance counselors, and coaches. Limit the number of hours your teenager gives to part-time jobs (20 hours per week should be the maximum) so that there is enough time and energy left to focus on school. Know about homework assignments and support your child in getting them done. Volunteer at the school, if possible. Schools want more parental involvement and will often try to accommodate your work schedule, if asked.

9. Know what your kids are watching, reading, and listening to.

The media (television, radio, movies, music videos, magazines, the Internet) are chock full of material sending the wrong messages. Sex rarely has meaning, unplanned pregnancy seldom happens, and few people having sex ever seem to be married or even especially committed to anyone. Is this consistent with your expectations and values? If not, it is important to talk with your children about what the media portray and what you think about it. If certain programs or movies offend you, say so, and explain why. Be "**media literate**"-think about what you and your family are watching and reading. Encourage your kids to think critically: ask them what they think about the programs they watch and the music they listen to. You can always turn the TV off, cancel subscriptions, and place certain movies off limits. You will probably not be able to fully control what your children see and hear, but you can certainly make your views known and control your own home environment.

10. These first nine tips for helping your children avoid teen pregnancy work best when they occur as part of strong, close relationships with your children that are built from an early age.

Strive for a relationship that is warm in tone, firm in discipline, and rich in communication, and one that emphasizes mutual trust and respect. There is no single way to create such relationships, but the following habits of the heart can help:

- Express love and affection clearly and often. Hug your children, and tell them how much they mean to you. Praise specific accomplishments, but remember that expressions of affection should be offered freely, not just for a particular achievement.
- Listen carefully to what your children say and pay thoughtful attention to what they do.
- Spend time with your children engaged in activities that suit their ages and interests, not just yours. Shared experiences build a "bank account" of affection and trust that forms the basis for future communication with them about specific topics, including sexual behavior.
- Be supportive and be interested in what interests them. Attend their sports events; learn about their hobbies; be enthusiastic about their achievements,

- even the little ones; ask them questions that show you care and want to know what is going on in their lives.
- Be courteous and respectful to your children and avoid hurtful teasing or ridicule. Don't compare your teenager with other family members (i.e., why can't you be like your older sister?). Show that you expect courtesy and respect from them in return.
 - Help them to build self-esteem by mastering skills; remember, self-esteem is earned, not given, and one of the best ways to earn it is by *doing* something well.
 - Try to have meals together as a family as often as possible, and use the time for conversation, not confrontation.

General Facts and Stats

How bad is the problem?

The United States has the highest rates of teen pregnancy and births in the western industrialized world. Teen pregnancy costs the United States at least \$7 billion annually.

Thirty-four percent of young women become pregnant at least once before they reach the age of 20 -- about 820,000 a year. Eight in ten of these pregnancies are unintended and 81 percent are to unmarried teens.

The teen birth rate has declined slowly but steadily from 1991 to 2003 with an overall decline of 33 percent for those aged 15 to 19. These recent declines reverse the 23-percent rise in the teenage birth rate from 1986 to 1991. The largest decline since 1991 by race was for black women. The birth rate for black teens aged 15 to 19 fell 45 percent between 1991 to 2003. Hispanic teen birth rates declined 21 percent between 1991 and 2003. The rates of both Hispanics and blacks, however, remain higher than for other groups. Hispanic teens now have the highest teenage birth rates. Most teenagers giving birth before 1980 were married whereas most teens giving birth today are unmarried.

The younger a teenaged girl is when she has sex for the first time, the more likely she is to have had unwanted or non-voluntary sex. Close to four in ten girls who had first intercourse at 13 or 14 report it was either non-voluntary or unwanted.

Who suffers the consequences?

Teen mothers are less likely to complete high school (only one-third receive a high school diploma) and only 1.5% have a college degree by age 30. Teen mothers are more likely to end up on welfare (nearly 80 percent of unmarried teen mothers end up on welfare).

The children of teenage mothers have lower birth weights, are more likely to perform poorly in school, and are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.

The sons of teen mothers are 13 percent more likely to end up in prison while teen daughters are 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves.

What helps prevent teen pregnancy?

The primary reason that teenage girls who have never had intercourse give for abstaining from sex is that having sex would be against their religious or moral values. Other reasons cited include desire to avoid pregnancy, fear of contracting a sexually transmitted disease (STD), and not having met the appropriate partner. Three of four girls and over half of boys report that girls who have sex do so because their boyfriends want them to.

Teenagers who have strong emotional attachments to their parents are much less likely to become sexually active at an early age.

Most people say teens should remain abstinent but should have access to contraception. Ninety-four percent of adults in the United States-and 91 percent of teenagers-think it important that school-aged children and teenagers be given a strong message from society that they should abstain from sex until they are out of high school. Seventy-eight percent of adults also think that sexually active teenagers should have access to contraception.

Contraceptive use among sexually active teens has increased but remains inconsistent. Three-quarters of teens use some method of contraception (usually a condom) the first time they have sex. A sexually active teen who does not use contraception has a 90 percent chance of pregnancy within one year.

Parents rate high among many teens as trustworthy and preferred information sources on birth control. One in two teens say they "trust" their parents most for reliable and complete information about birth control, only 12 percent say a friend.

Teens who have been raised by both parents (biological or adoptive) from birth, have lower probabilities of having sex than teens who grew up in any other family situation. At age 16, 22 percent of girls from intact families and 44 percent of other girls have had sex at least once. Similarly, teens from intact, two-parent families are less likely to give birth in their teens than girls from other family backgrounds.

When should I talk to my child about sex?

Before they make you a grandparent. One of every 3 girls has had sex by age 16, 2 out of 3 by age 18. Two of 3 boys have had sex by age 18.

Surprise: Your teen wants to hear from you. Seven of ten teens interviewed said that they were ready to listen to things parents thought they were not ready to hear. When asked about the reasons why teenage girls have babies, 78 percent of white and 70 percent of African-American teenagers reported that lack of communication between a girl and her parents is often a reason teenage girls have babies.

Do teens wish they had waited to have sex?

Yes. A majority of both girls and boys who are sexually active wish they had waited. Eight in ten girls and six in ten boys say they wish they had waited until they were older to have sex.

The Next Challenge: Guarding Against Complacency

The 1990s have brought good news: both teen pregnancy and teen birth rates have declined nationwide, in all states, and among all age and racial/ethnic groups - led by both less sexual activity and better contraceptive use. As a nation, we deserve to be proud of these encouraging trends. But even limited success can have a downside if it means that the public and the media begin to believe that the teen pregnancy problem has been solved.

The most important challenge we face now is to keep from becoming complacent about teen pregnancy and childbearing - **and here's why:**

Teen pregnancy rates in the U.S. remain much too high. Despite the recently declining rates, thirty-four percent of teenage girls get pregnant at least once before they reach age 20, resulting in 820,000 teen pregnancies a year.

The U.S. still leads the industrialized world in teen pregnancy and birth rates - by a wide margin. In fact, the U.S. rates are double, triple, even ten times those of other western countries, which puts us at a terrible competitive disadvantage in the global economy.

Teen pregnancy costs society billions of dollars a year. There are nearly half a million children born to teen mothers each year. Most of these mothers are unmarried, and many will end up poor and on welfare. Each year the federal government alone spends about \$40 billion to help families that began with a teenage birth.

Teen pregnancy hurts the business community's "bottom line." Too many children start school unprepared to learn, and teachers are overwhelmed trying to deal with problems that start in the home. Forty-five percent of first births in the United States are to women who are either unmarried, teenagers, or lacking a high school degree, which means that too many children - tomorrow's workers - are born into families that are not prepared to help them succeed. In addition, teen mothers often do not finish high school themselves. It's not easy for a teen to learn work skills and be a dependable employee while caring for children.

Preventing teen pregnancy is a cost-effective way to reduce child poverty. Children should be born to adults who are ready and able to nurture them. Research is clear that children of teen parents have more health problems, do more poorly in school, and are more likely to end up in prison or on welfare than children born to older parents. By preventing children from having children, we can address many vexing social problems, including the persistent cycle of poverty that comes from generations of teen childbearing.

A new crop of kids becomes teenagers each year. This means that prevention efforts must be constantly renewed and reinvented. And between 1995 and 2010, the number of girls aged 15-19 is projected to increase by 2.2 million.

Teen pregnancy is still a big problem for many communities. Although rates have come down overall, certain sub-populations, defined by geography, age, racial or ethnic group, still have very high rates. For example, in some states, the teen pregnancy problem has gotten worse in certain urban or rural communities. The Hispanic/Latino community, the fastest growing ethnic group in the Nation, now has the highest teen birth rate.

Underlying trends behind the declines may change. The U.S. has enjoyed a healthy and growing economy in the 1990s, and opportunities for jobs may have motivated teens to avoid pregnancy. What happens when the nation experiences an economic downturn? And while new treatments for HIV/AIDS are certainly great news, less fear among teens about potentially deadly consequences of sex may lead them to reverse the recent trends of less sexual activity and better contraceptive use.

Declining teen pregnancy rates means we *can* make a difference. Rather than making us complacent, the recent good news should encourage us to do more to continue the current trends. The hard truth is that yesterday's good news about declining teen pregnancy and birth rates won't mean much to the boys and girls who turn 13 next year. For them, we must redouble our efforts to make sure that they benefit from the successes that their older brothers and sisters have begun to see.

About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The mission of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is to improve the life prospects of this generation and the next by influencing cultural values and building a more effective grassroots movement. The Campaign's goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third by 2005. For more information, visit the Campaign's homepage: www.teenpregnancy.org.

A final note: it's never too late to improve a relationship with a child or teenager. Don't underestimate the great need that children feel--at all ages--for a close relationship with their parents and for their parents' guidance, approval, and support.