


## Says: American Opinion on Teen Pregnancy and Related Issues 2003

 *Who most influences teens' decisions about sex? Do parents or peers matter more? Should society strongly encourage adolescents to abstain from sexual intercourse? What do adults and teens think about topics such as contraception, virginity, and the influence of the media? Understanding Americans' attitudes about these topics helps point to strategies for addressing teen pregnancy prevention. To that end, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy commissions annual surveys of adults and adolescents seeking answers to these and related questions. This Science Says brief summarizes some of the key findings from the National Campaign's 2003 survey. Data in this brief are drawn from the publication, With One Voice 2003: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy (available at [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org)).*

*The surveys were conducted via telephone in August and September 2003 with over 1,000 adults (aged 20 and over) and 1,000 adolescents (aged 12–19). All results are considered nationally representative. See the methodology section below for more information on how these surveys were conducted.*

### Survey Says:

**Parental influence.** Teens say parents (45%) influence their decisions about sex more strongly than friends (31%), religious leaders (7%), teachers and sex educators (6%), and the media (4%). Parents, however, mistakenly believe that teens' friends are most influential (48%). Only 32% of adults believe parents are most influential.

- 88% of teens say it would be easier to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.
- 59% of teens say that when it comes to healthy, responsible

relationships, their parents are their primary role models.

*Implications:* When it comes to teens' decisions about sex, parents underestimate their own influence and overestimate the influence of others. Parents, and those that work with parents, should be encouraged by these findings and over two decades of other research that suggest that the quality of parent/child relationships can make a real difference.<sup>1</sup> Overall closeness between parents and their children, shared activities, parental presence in the home, and parental caring and concern are all associated with a reduced risk of early sex and teen pregnancy.<sup>2</sup>

### Teens express cautious attitudes and values toward sex.

Despite what is often portrayed in the media and what many adults may assume, as a group, teens have a cautious outlook about sex. Above all, teens say their own morals, values, and/or religious beliefs — as well as concerns about their future — influence their decisions about sex far more than concerns about pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Consider the following:

- 85% of teens say that sex should only occur in a long-term, committed relationship.
- 84% of teens believe that teen pregnancy prevention programs

should teach young people to be married before they have a child.

- Only 26% of teens say that it is embarrassing for teens to admit they are virgins.

*Implications:* Parents and other adults should not assume that teens have a casual view about sex. The majority of young people believe that sex should be reserved for serious relationships and that child-bearing is best after marriage. It is important to note that these beliefs are value-based, not just the result of fears of physical consequences such as STDs.

### **Abstinence and contraception.**

Adults and teens support providing teens with a strong abstinence message and believe that teens should not be sexually active. At the same time, they also strongly support giving young people information about contraception. For those teens that are having sex, a clear majority of Americans believe that teens should have access to contraception.

- Nearly all adults (94%) and teens (92%) believe that it is important for teens to be given a strong message from society that they should not have sex until they are at least out of high school.
- Seven in ten (71%) adults and 59% of teens believe that teens should not be sexually active, but that teens who are should have access to contraception.
- Three quarters of adults and 60% of teens wish that teens were getting more information about abstinence *and* contraception, rather than just one or the other.

- Nearly identical percentages (67% of adults, 66% of teens) urge policymakers in Washington to place greater emphasis on both encouraging teens not to have sex and on using contraception, rather than just one or the other.

### **Adults and teens reject the “mixed message” criticism.**

Stressing abstinence to teens while also providing them with information about contraception is not viewed as “mixed message.” Two-thirds of adults and three-quarters of teens view such a message as “clear and specific.”

Respondents were posed the following proposition: “Suppose a parent or other adult tells a teenager the following: ‘I feel very strongly that not having sex at all during your middle and high school years is your best option and the right thing to do. I also think it is important for you to receive information about birth control or protection. But again, I think not having sex is your best option.’” Respondents were then asked if they thought this was a clear and specific message or a confusing or mixed message.

- 68% of adults and 77% of teens view such a message as “clear and specific.”

### **Teens want more information.**

Few adults or teens feel that young people are getting enough information about abstinence and contraception.

- Only 13% of teens and 1% of adults say they are/teens are getting enough information about abstinence and contraception.
- 60% of teens wish they were getting more information about

both abstinence and contraception — 9% say they want more information about *just* abstinence, and 11% want more information about *just* contraception.

- As for adults, 74% wish teens were getting more information about both abstinence and contraception — 18% want teens to receive more information about *just* abstinence, and 5% want teens to get information *just* about contraception.

*Implications:* Taken together, the findings from the previous three sections make clear that adults and teens support education about abstinence and contraception. They believe that young people should be strongly encouraged to not have sex until they are at least out of high school and should also be given information about contraception. They also believe that those teens who are sexually active should have access to contraception. This broad support for both abstinence and contraception should be taken into account when funding and developing programs for youth.

### **Teens overestimate the percentage of their peers who have had sex.**

The 2001 Youth Risk Behavior Survey conducted and published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that 46% of those in grades 9–12 have had sex. However,

- 68% of those in grades 9–12 in this survey believe that teens their age are sexually experienced.

**Sex and regret.** Although the majority of those adolescents surveyed had not had sexual intercourse, two-thirds of those who had

said they regretted having sex when they did.

- 67% of sexually experienced teens say they wish they had waited longer before having sexual intercourse.

*Implications.* The previous two sections suggest that teens need to understand that not everyone is “doing it,” and that many young people who are sexually active wish they had waited longer. Teens’ *perception* of what their friends are doing is very important. A teen who believes his or her friends are sexually active is more likely to initiate sex, and less likely to do so if he or she believes that peers are not sexually active.<sup>3</sup>

**Dating older partners.** Younger teens have more permissive attitudes than older teens about the appropriateness of dating someone three or more years older.

- 29% of teens aged 12–14 think it is okay for teens aged 14 or young to date someone who is three or more years older.
- Only 19% of teens aged 15–19 think such a dating arrangement is appropriate.

*Implications:* According to research from multiple investigators, younger teens who date older partners are much more likely to have sex. For example, the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health notes the following: 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.<sup>4</sup>

**Adult supervision.** A significant minority (45%) of teens in grades 9–12 report that they have been at a co-ed party in the past six months where there were no adults in the house.

- 19% of those in grades 5–8 say they have been at a party recently with boys and girls without any adults present.

*Implications:* Research indicates that teens whose parents supervise them are more likely to be older when they first have sex, to have fewer partners, to use contraception, and to be less at-risk for pregnancy. However, “very strict” monitoring by parents is actually associated with a *greater* risk of teen pregnancy,<sup>5</sup> so parents need to strike a balance.

**The message for boys.** Six in ten teens overall believe that teen boys often receive the message that “sex and pregnancy are not a big deal.”

- 49% of boys and 70% of girls believe that boys receive a different message about sex and pregnancy than girls do.

*Implications:* A “double-standard” may be alive and well — one encouraging teen girls to abstain from sex but implying that sex and teen pregnancy is not that big a deal for boys. Certainly, increased attention has been paid in recent years to the responsibilities of boys and young men in preventing teen pregnancy and the critical role that

fathers play in the lives of their children. But these data suggest that more work needs to be done in this area.

**Media influence.** Most adults and teens (87% and 88% respectively) wish the media showed more or talked more about the consequences of sex, including teen pregnancy. Respondents also made clear that the media plays the role of conversation starter:

- Nearly half of teens (45%) say that in the past year or so, something in the media sparked a conversation with their friends or parents about the consequences of sex.
- 58% of parents of teens say they had such a conversation with their children or friends because of something they saw in the media.

*Implications:* Previous National Campaign polling has indicated that parents believe they should talk to their kids about sex but often don’t know what to say, how to say it, or when to start.<sup>6</sup> These findings show the media can be — and often is — a springboard to begin such discussions about sexual behavior, values, relationships, and teen pregnancy. These data also strongly support a recent RAND corporation study indicating that television entertainment programs can provide responsible messages about sex and related issues for adolescents, particularly if teen viewers watch the show with their parents and/or discuss the sexual messages they have seen on television with an adult.<sup>7</sup>

---

## 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 translates 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, user-friendly briefs.

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

---

### 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.

### Sources and Methodology

Unless otherwise noted, all data presented in this brief comes from the National Campaign publication, *With One Voice 2003: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*. *With One Voice* is drawn from two national surveys, one of young people aged 12–19 and the other of adults aged 20 and older. The survey was designed by the National Campaign and was conducted by International Communications Research, an independent polling firm based in Pennsylvania.

The two surveys are weighted to provide nationally representative estimates of those aged 12–19 and aged 20 and older. Fieldwork for these surveys was conducted between August 21 and September 10, 2003. For the teen survey, telephone surveys were conducted with 1,000 young people. For the adult survey, telephone interviews were conducted with 1,008 individuals. The margin of error for both surveys is +/- 3 percentage points.

The sample for the teen survey was drawn using two different methods. The first sample source used random digit dial (RDD). RDD numbers are drawn from telephone households throughout the continental United States. As a second sample source, a database of households with teenagers aged 12–19, was tapped. All interviews were conducted using the computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) system. The CATI system ensures that all questions are rotated, and that when answer options are presented, they are also rotated. This rotating eliminates "question position" bias.

The adults survey was done as part of a national, twice-weekly telephone omnibus survey using a fully replicated, stratified, single-stage RDD sample of telephone households. Sample telephone numbers were computer-generated.

### Funding information

This research brief was supported by cooperative agreement 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.

### Author information.

This research brief was written by Bill Albert, Senior Director of Communications, Publications, and Technology at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

### Endnotes

1. Miller, B. (1998). *Families Matter: A research synthesis of family influences on adolescent pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
2. Blum, R.W., & Rinehart, P.M. (1998). *Reducing the Risk: Connections that make a difference in the lives of youth*. Center for Adolescent health and Development, University of Minnesota. Minneapolis, MN.
3. Brown, B., & Theobald, W. (1999). How Peers Matter: A research synthesis of peer influences in adolescent pregnancy. In *Peer Potential: Making the most of how teens influence each other* (pp. 27–80). Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy
4. Bruckner, H., & Bearman, P. (2003). Dating Behavior and Sexual Activity of Young Adolescents: Analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. In Albert, B., Brown, S., & Flanigan, C. (Eds.), *14 and Younger: The sexual behavior of young adolescents* (pp. 31–56). Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
5. Miller, B. (1998). *Families Matter: A research synthesis of family influences on adolescent pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.
6. National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. (2001). *With One Voice: America's adults and teens sound off about teen pregnancy*. Washington, DC: Author.
7. Collins, R., Elliott, M., Berry, S., Kanouse, D., Hunter, S. (2003). Entertainment Television as a Healthy Sex Educator: The Impact of Condom-Efficacy Information in an Episode of Friends. *Pediatrics*, 112: 1115–1121.