



we are not “kids today.”

we are not “those people.”

we are real.

we care about this issue.

this is our story.

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[GET THE
PICTURE?]

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Teens face a variety of challenges in their quest to become adults...

One of the most significant challenges teens face is dealing with personal responsibility for their health and sexuality. However, teens tell us that these issues sometimes take a back seat to other issues such as personal safety, poverty, education and family stability. Even teens in so-called “stable” environments feel the effects of challenging social and personal environments. All too often the result is early sexual activity and unplanned pregnancies.

How do they cope? What helps young people develop healthy attitudes, set personal boundaries, and effectively prevent pregnancies and STDs if they become sexually active? Just as every teenager is an individual, so is their approach to their health and sexual behavior. But the evidence is overwhelming: teens are most likely to develop healthy sexuality in an environment that includes age-appropriate and comprehensive sex education, positive adult role models, involvement and guidance from a respected adult, and easy access to contraception if they are sexually active.¹

While adults in communities across the country continue to debate the merits of various approaches to reducing rates of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, young people are still getting pregnant and contracting STDs.

In California alone almost 60,000 teenagers will have babies this year.² Although the teen birth-rate is dropping, experts agree that we still have a long way to go to claim victory on this issue. But there is hope. Many teenagers have made the decision to get healthy, stay healthy and take personal responsibility for their behavior. Even better, many teens are actively helping their peers prevent pregnancies, avoid STDs and make smart decisions.

From sharing information about disease prevention, to taking someone to the health clinic, to signing someone up for an after-school program, or just being a friend, we see teens meeting the challenges of their young lives head-on. A cadre of wise, dedicated adults assist them along the way.

We're pleased to introduce you to some of the people who have made a commitment to helping teens, to informing adults and to their own personal health. These young people aren't always focused. They aren't even always successful. But they are informed, enthused and committed. They challenge us to “get real” about healthy teen sexuality.

Get the picture? ■

¹ SIECUS 1999

² California Department of Health Services 1999

Some teens help other teens get protection.

Guillermo, Agapita, Nancy and Laura distribute condoms to teens in places where they hang out, like shopping malls and the beach.

The condom packages include information about preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as well as information about a local teen clinic where they can get help.

“Some people say to us ‘you’re just promoting sex and you shouldn’t be doing that.’ But I thought I should be getting the right information out,” explains Laura, 19.

She adds that at first, “my Dad was not OK with it. You see, because [parents] don’t talk about it to us, they feel like we’re going to be given the wrong idea about sex.”

Nancy, 17, adds, “A lot of Latinos don’t get [the right] information, and I want to get the word out about services available.”

Distributing condoms also allows them to answer questions about sex, which Nancy feels is important, “Everybody’s going through the same thing, so why not tell them about it?” ■



“Most teens are a little bit more cautious. They know what can happen.”
–Guillermo, 17

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“They tell me they feel more comfortable talking to someone their own age because they don’t feel like anybody’s preaching to them.”

–Karla, 17

Some teens help other teens avoid disease.

Teen clinics provide young adults with a place to go where they feel safe while getting their sexual health needs taken care of.

They can also help teens learn more about their bodies. In some clinics, teens themselves play a large role in running the clinic, like Victor and Karla.

What they frequently see are teens coming in with sexually transmitted diseases. Teens sometimes choose oral sex over intercourse because of the risk of pregnancy.

Yet Victor, 16, explains that oral sex has a lot of consequences of its own, “The number one misconception [among teens] is that oral sex is not sex and teens think they can’t get sexually transmitted diseases [from it].”

These teens help set the record straight. ■

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[this is MonaLisa
& Randal.
They're mother
and son.]

Parents are a big part of the solution.

Randal, 14, Tironisa, 16, and Kelli, 16, have parents who are active in a local youth outreach program which educates teens about sexual health, self-esteem and dealing with peer pressure. In the neighborhood where they live, some 11-year-olds are sexually active. Kelli's mom, Veronica, is not surprised, "Everything is about sex these days – on TV, music videos, even toothpaste ads! How are you going to monitor your kids?"

She believes the only way to protect her kids is to educate them. Randal's mom, MonaLisa, agrees, "It's not just a one-time talk either – it's consistent. Because it's not easy for them. We say one thing and then they hear something else at school." Monica, who is Tironisa's mom, adds, "It's about how you talk to them and how open your relationship is. You have to go into it gradually."

Veronica herself was pregnant at 16. "I wish I had known back than what I know now." She adds that there are still a lot of myths among teens about sex, and parents should help set the record straight. Veronica concludes, "Some parents don't want to talk to their kids about sex. But you know what? With the right information, kids can make good decisions about it." ■

Communication plays a big role.

Monica and Bernardo met in their local youth outreach program and have been going out for almost six months.

They bring the lessons learned in their program activities to their personal lives and emphasize that communication is the most important thing about a healthy relationship.

But there are no easy formulas to follow, explains Monica, 17. “It depends upon each person. Everyone communicates differently.” And being in a relationship, they feel it’s important to be honest and open about sex.

Bernardo has had a good role model for that, noting “My dad was really open about sex.” Bernardo credits his father with educating him about the things happening to his body, and about taking responsibility for himself.

Monica, whose parents weren’t as open about sex, thinks that honesty is a good policy. “I think young people deserve to have knowledge about STDs and pregnancy,” Monica states firmly. “Otherwise, how are they going to know how to take care of things?”

So, with all the information they now have, how do they know if they’re ready for sex? Again Bernardo emphasizes, “communication is a big thing” and that “you have to be able to talk about it.” Protection ranks up there as well, he says.

Monica sums up her feelings, “When you’re in a relationship, you feel what your heart tells you. But you must do what your head tells you to do. That means having all the information and giving it a lot of thought before taking such a big step.” ■

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[this is
Laveenya,
Andrea,
and Antonia.
They're
mentors.]

Mentors can help by making time for teens.

Laveenya, 26, Andrea, 25, and Antonia, 28, are teen mentors. Each has different relationships and levels of activities with their teenage friends, but each one bears a large responsibility.

Antonia explains, “You have a lot of roles to play as a mentor.” Sometimes their days together are fun – “you’re just out kickin’ it.” Other times they do homework together or discuss issues at school. “If you’re not holding them accountable for other things in their life, you’re not doing your whole job.”

And often their guidance turns to dealing with pressures at school, where sex plays a large role. Andrea explains, “I guide [my mentee] to make healthy decisions. We talk about sex because there’s so much peer pressure [at school]. At home she gets the scare tactic. I try to give her outcomes and information and let her gauge everything for herself.”

The parents of these teens are supportive of the mentoring program. Laveenya explains, “Parents are more open to having us give a one-on-one talk with the teens because they can’t do it themselves.” And for these mentors, she explains, “It’s easier to talk about it because there’s already that relationship.” ■

Programs like the ones described here have been increasingly funded and supported throughout the state, helping communities deal with the threat of pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases among teens. We must continue to be supportive of these programs and encourage young people and adults to get involved in this issue.

Teens need to be valued, respected and expected to act responsibly. Addressing sexual topics with teens in an open and honest manner will have a positive effect on youth, and will help instill a sense of respect and responsibility in them. They in turn will exhibit sexually responsible behavior and share the same information with their peers.

To truly have an impact on the high rate of teen pregnancies we must all be willing to work together and find ways to become involved. Young people must be provided with resources that teach them how to behave in responsible and healthy ways. This will require an even deeper commitment by adults, schools, community leaders and policy makers.

To find out how you can become involved or if you would like more information, check out the Get Real web site at www.letsgetreal.org ■

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