



GET REAL!
ABOUT TEEN PREGNANCY

**Solutions:
Getting Real About
Teen Pregnancy**



SOLUTIONS: GETTING REAL ABOUT TEEN PREGNANCY

For those of us who are concerned about the lives and futures of America's young people, adolescent sexual activity and teenage pregnancy become important and sometimes controversial issues. Adolescence is a time when, among other important developmental processes, individuals form a sense of their sexual self-perception and values. Studies find that more than 90 percent of adolescents report some type of sexual activity and over half of American high school students have had sexual intercourse.¹

The U.S. has one of the highest teen pregnancy rates of any industrialized country.² In California, over 64,000 women under the age of 20 gave birth in 1996, and 126,300 pregnancies occurred, giving the state the dubious distinction of having one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the nation.³ With so many teens reporting that they are sexually active, the issue becomes one of determining what support and assistance adolescents need from adults to develop sexually in a healthy, self-affirming manner.

Traditionally, teen pregnancy prevention efforts have focused on abstinence-only education in the schools, and consequence-based and punitive-based public education campaigns. An important concern is that the health needs of sexually active teens are usually overlooked in schools and communities.

Research suggests that adults can take a realistic approach to preventing teen pregnancy by examining the following questions:

- What defines healthy adolescent sexuality?
- What are the components and benefits of comprehensive sexuality education?
- How can we ensure access to and use of contraceptives among sexually active teens?

The concerns about teen pregnancy and the incidence of sexually transmitted diseases among teens are only part of the story.⁴ The reasons for prevention of these problems are obvious, but an approach that emphasizes healthy sexuality in a positive, responsible manner reaps benefits that are fundamental and lifelong.

The "Get Real About Teen Pregnancy" public education campaign is committed to helping Californians become aware of, and support, effective solutions. Searching for appropriate responses to address the problems and issues associated with adolescent sexuality and teen pregnancy is crucial. In this report we examine

research that defines healthy adolescent sexuality, and that evaluates different means of improving teens' ability to achieve mature, values-based development in this basic component of human behavior.

WHAT DEFINES HEALTHY ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY?

Becoming a sexually healthy adult is a key developmental task of adolescence. Achieving sexual health requires the

integration of psychological, physical, societal, cultural, education, economic and spiritual factors. It includes sexual development and reproductive health and includes characteristics such as the ability to develop and maintain meaningful interpersonal relationships; appreciate one's own body; interact with both genders in respectful and appropriate ways; and express affection, love and intimacy in ways consistent with one's own values.⁵

Although the phrase may not be widely used in discussing adolescent sexuality, research literature provides definitions of what constitutes healthy adolescent sexuality. Adolescent sexuality is considered healthy if the adolescent develops a "responsible and healthy sexual identity that leads to equally responsible and satisfying sexual relationships."⁶ Young people who have developed a healthy sexuality have the knowledge and

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skills they need to make responsible decisions about their sexual behavior; they understand sexual development and feelings; they have the skills and self-esteem to set personal boundaries; and they are respectful in their personal relationships.

Achieving healthy sexuality is not a simple or easy matter, especially for American adolescents. While many teens engage in sexual activity in a healthy way, some teens become involved in sex when they are looking for love, affection, and other non-sexual needs, such as a sense of belonging, self-esteem, and a confirmation of masculinity.⁷ Adolescents who have low expectations regarding their education, work, and family lives often look to sexual activity as an arena of self-expression. (This is a particular concern when young people feel a lack of opportunities for their future, an area where adults can have a strong influence.)

Some young women who see themselves as having few future opportunities believe they attain a higher status through sexual activity and even pregnancy and parenthood.⁸ Media depictions often emphasize being sexually attractive and active as more important than other spheres of life. The media also tend to stereotype sexuality in narrow, unhealthy ways.⁹ Teens receive mixed messages about sexuality, which can complicate an already confusing time in their lives.

HOW CAN ADULTS SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE HEALTHY ADOLESCENT SEXUALITY?

Adults can provide accurate, age-appropriate information and education about reproductive health and sexuality; foster and support responsible decision-making skills; offer guidance and

the means for young people to explore and affirm their own values; and model healthy sexual attitudes and behavior.¹⁰

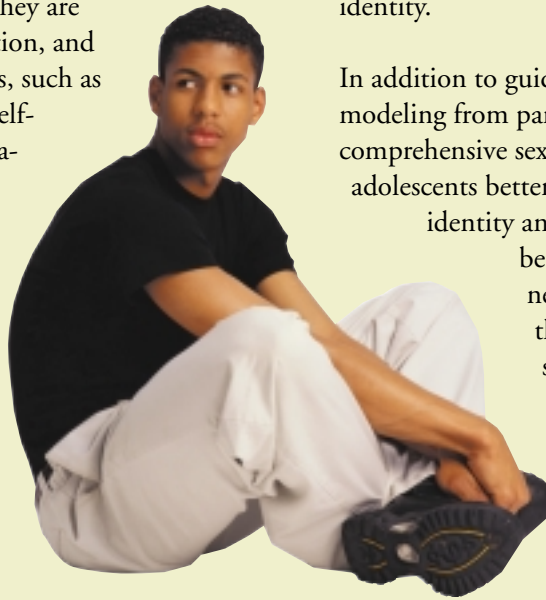
Development of a healthy sexuality is a lifelong process and, for teens, adults play an important role. Issues about adolescent sexuality need to be discussed between parents and their children in a climate of open communication.¹¹ Adults need to comfortably and competently help guide adolescents in developing a healthy sexual identity.

In addition to guidance and positive role-modeling from parents and other caring adults, comprehensive sexuality education can help adolescents better understand their own sexual identity and learn how to differentiate between sexual and non-sexual needs.¹² All adults can support the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education in school curricula to ensure that teens have the information they need to make responsible decisions about their sexual health and behavior.

WHAT IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION?

Comprehensive sexuality education offers young people age-appropriate, medically accurate, and up-to-date information about reproductive health. By the time the curriculum addresses adolescents, it includes the developmental stages of adolescent sexuality and educates young people about healthy reproductive systems, as well as the knowledge, values, and behaviors associated with healthy sexuality.

Comprehensive sexuality education includes information about abstinence, and helps young people learn how to set personal boundaries. To be effective, however, sexuality education also acknowledges that many adolescents will choose to have sex. Sexually active teens need to have information about contraception so they can prevent unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.



Sexuality education covers a variety of approaches to teaching young people about sex. Some forms emphasize the biological and physiological aspects and shy away from any sustained attention to the interpersonal or ethical dimensions. Other programs promote abstinence exclusively and avoid addressing the means of protecting oneself from consequences of being sexually active. Still others address a range of sexuality-related issues but may not include information about the use of and access to contraceptives.¹³

Comprehensive sexuality education is distinguished by its focus on the whole person, its emphasis on age-appropriate sexuality education that begins before puberty. It acknowledges that many adolescents will become sexually active, and should be provided with information about contraceptives.¹⁴ Comprehensive sexuality education programs are abstinence-based, but also incorporate components such as contraceptive education and life skills.¹⁵ The life skills component uses activities to help students learn decision-making skills and goal-setting related to their sexual health, such as saying “no” to sex and communication within intimate relationships.

WHY IS COMPREHENSIVE SEXUALITY EDUCATION IMPORTANT?

The evidence demonstrates that comprehensive sexuality education is more effective than more narrowly focused sexuality education programs in preventing unintended teen pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases.

More than 100 organizations — including the American Medical Association and the American Psychological Association — support a comprehensive approach to sexuality education.¹⁶ Their stance is supported by research, which strongly

suggests the positive and effective dual roles of access to and education about the use of contraceptives as an important part of comprehensive sexuality education.

One rigorously evaluated program found that, a year after a group of African-American male adolescents received sex education emphasizing condom use as a method for sexually-active teens to reduce risk of diseases, they were using condoms more often than a group in a program that endorsed abstinence only.¹⁷

Another study evaluated the effectiveness of a widely implemented middle school sex education curriculum. While the program broadly appeals to parents and schools because of its focus on postponing sex, after 17 months of receiving the curriculum, teens who were in the curriculum showed no significant behavior changes in the desired direction. Students in both the intervention and control groups were equally likely to be sexually active, to use contraceptives, or to report a pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease.¹⁸

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Balanced and accurate sexuality education programs that are introduced in sequence over the entire span of adolescence do encourage young people to postpone sexual activity. But they place this message in the context of accurate and complete information. They teach ways to lower the risk of adverse consequences when sexually active, and they teach communication, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. They specifically focus on skills development that enable teens to avoid pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Such programs have demonstrated their effectiveness in rigorous evaluations.



They have been found to be effective in delaying first intercourse, and in increasing the use of protection by sexually active teens. These programs do not contribute to increased levels of sexual activity, earlier sexual activity, or higher numbers of sexual partners among those who are sexually active.¹⁹

Comprehensive sexuality education requires a deeper commitment by adults, schools and other institutions to provide the resources for youth to learn how to behave in responsible and healthy ways. This means that parents are involved in communicating with their children about sexuality in a positive way that reinforces the family's values. It also means that there are readily available counseling services for teens who need them and that there are attractive alternatives to casual sexual activity that involve teens in activities that foster their development. Finally, it also means that sexually active teens have access to contraceptives and safer sex protection, along with information about how to properly use them. It also means that teens do not face unnecessary barriers to accessing such services or products in their community.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT FOR SEXUALLY ACTIVE TEENS TO HAVE ACCESS TO CONTRACEPTIVES — AND WHAT DOES “ACCESS” MEAN?

Regardless of the socio-economic variables, it stands to reason that if a sexually active teen does not have access to contraceptives or information about how to properly use contraceptives, it is far more likely a pregnancy will occur.

A recent study estimated the number of teen pregnancies and teen births that would have occurred if contraceptives had not been available to sexually active teens. Using data on sexual contraceptive practices from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth, the study found that current levels of contraceptive use in the United States averted an estimated 1.65 million pregnancies among women aged 15-19. Furthermore, if young women had had no access to contraceptives, an estimated one million additional pregnancies would have occurred, leading to 480,000 live births; 390,000 abortions; 120,000 miscarriages; 10,000 ectopic pregnancies; and 37 maternal deaths.²⁰



Research evaluating school condom distribution programs found that such programs were effective in encouraging sexually active students to use condoms. Moreover, results from several studies indicate that making condoms available in schools does not increase sexual activity.^{21, 22, 23} One study supports the effectiveness of contraceptive education as

part of a comprehensive sexuality education program.²⁴

Contraceptive access in sexuality education is the emphasis placed by a program on improving access to contraceptive services to sexually active participants.²⁵ Innovation, confidentiality, and cost are key factors in providing access to contraceptives. Some school-based programs make condoms available to high school students in a confidential and low-or-no-cost manner. Many adolescents, however, face social barriers to obtaining contraceptives.

Research on increasing contraceptive access has been done through a process known as “contraceptive mapping” which enlisted the aid of the business community. Researchers set up an innovative program in a small rural community

where they identified places in the area where contraceptives were available (contraceptive mapping), then provided this information to adolescents. A brown bag program was set up with participating pharmacies and information about the program was disseminated to adolescents on cards so they could call in their orders for contraceptives, which would be prepackaged in a brown bag for pick-up to ensure confidentiality.²⁶

ACTION AND THE CONTINUING DEBATE

While more research is needed, there is conclusive evidence of the effectiveness of the comprehensive sexuality education approach. Sexuality education has become a polarized and heavily debated issue. Despite the rhetoric, the realities of teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and the debasing of human sexuality through violence and exploitation should continue to be addressed. This can best be accomplished by countering the negative and risky climate surrounding adolescent sexuality with a broad and ethical curriculum that provides young people all of the tools, skills, knowledge, and values they need to become sexually healthy adults.

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