

Background

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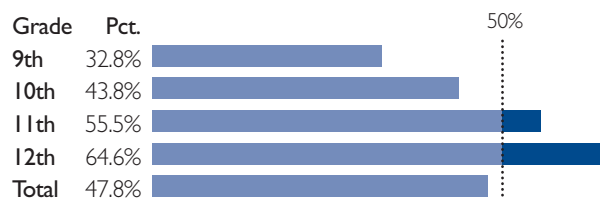
Teen Sex: The Parent Factor

Christine C. Kim

The statistics on teen sexuality in the United States are troubling. About 7 percent of high school students report having had sex before the age of 13. By ninth grade, one-third of high school students have engaged in sexual activity, and by 12th grade, two-thirds.¹ Yet the majority of these teens, 60 percent overall and 67 percent among younger adolescents, regret their first experience and wish they had waited longer.² Sadly, for many teens, the consequences go far beyond regrets.

Sexual Activity Among High Schoolers

Percent of High School Students Who Have Ever Engaged in Sexual Activity, 2007



Before
Age 13 7.1%

Source: Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2007; Danice K. Eatson, Laura Kann, Steve Kinchen et al., "Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007," Surveillance Summaries, Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report, Vol. 57, No. SS-4 (June 6, 2008), Table 61.

Chart 1 • B 2194  heritage.org

Talking Points

- The statistics on teen sexuality in the United States are troubling. Two-thirds of 12th graders have engaged in sexual activity. One in four teenage girls has at least one sexually transmitted infection, and one in five will become teen mothers.
- Social science research suggests that parents can influence their adolescents' sexual behavior. Protective parental influences include the intact family structure, parents' disapproval of adolescent sex, and a strong parent-child relationship.
- Policies and programs focused on reducing teen sexual activity and related negative outcomes should strengthen parental involvement. Conversely, efforts that discourage parental involvement or bypass parental consent in sensitive areas should be uniformly opposed.

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Teen Sexual Activity and Outcomes

Early sexual activity is associated with a host of negative outcomes that can have lasting physical, emotional, social, and economic impacts on the lives of young people, particularly teenage girls and young women.

Sexually Transmitted Diseases. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that one in four teenage girls has at least one sexually transmitted infection (STI).³ Teenage girls, especially, are physiologically vulnerable to these infections,⁴ and early sexual activity increases the risk of infection. One study found that those who begin sexual activity at age 13 are twice as likely to become infected as peers who remain sexually abstinent throughout their teen years.⁵

Teen Pregnancy and Unwed Childbearing. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy estimates that about one in two Hispanic and black teenage girls and one in five Caucasian teenage girls will become pregnant at least once before turning 20. Overall, nearly one in five adolescent girls will give birth in her teens.⁶

Engaging in early sexual activity elevates the risk of teenage girls becoming pregnant and single mothers. Girls who become sexually active during early adolescence are three times as likely to become single

mothers as those who remain abstinent throughout their teenage years. Nearly 40 percent of girls who begin sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 will give birth outside marriage, compared to 9 percent of those who remain abstinent until their early twenties.⁷

Marital Stability and Maternal Poverty. Sexual activity at an early age may also affect marital and economic stability later in life. Among women in their thirties, those who were sexually active during early adolescence are half as likely to be in stable marriages as those who waited until their early twenties to have sex.⁸ Early sexual activity is also linked to maternal poverty. At the time of a large national survey in 1995, nearly 30 percent of mothers who began sexual activity at ages 13 or 14 lived in poverty compared to 12 percent of those who waited until their early twenties.⁹

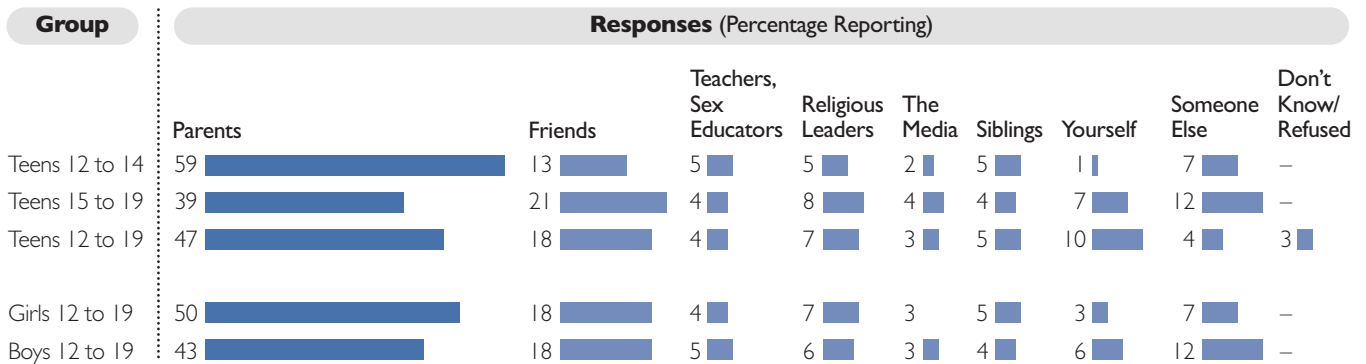
Parental Influence and Teen Sex

Many policymakers, health professionals, and “safe sex” advocates respond to these troubling statistics by demanding more comprehensive sex education and broader access to contraceptives for minors. They assume that teens are unable to delay their sexual behavior and that a combination of information about and access to contraceptives will effectively lead to protected sex, preventing any form of harm to youngsters. Not only are these

1. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States, 2007,” *Surveillance Summaries*, Vol. 58, No. SS-4 (June 6, 2008), Table 61, at http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/pdf/yrbs07_mmwr.pdf (September 2, 2008).
2. Bill Albert, “With Once Voice 2007: America’s Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy,” The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, February 2007, at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV2007_fulltext.pdf (September 1, 2008).
3. Press release, “Prevalence of Sexually Transmitted Infections and Bacterial Vaginosis Among Female Adolescents in the United States: Data from the National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey (NHANES) 2003–2004,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, March 11, 2008, at <http://www.cdc.gov/stdconference/2008/media/summaries-11march2008.htm#tues1> (September 1, 2008). Comparable estimates for teenage boys are not available.
4. Willard Cates, “Reproductive Tract Infections,” in Robert A. Hatch *et al.*, eds., *Contraceptive Technology* (New York: Ardent Media, 2004).
5. Robert E. Rector, Kirk A. Johnson, Lauren R. Noyes, and Shannan Martin, “The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity and Multiple Sexual Partners Among Women: A Book of Charts,” The Heritage Foundation, June 23, 2003.
6. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, “Policy Brief: Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Teen Pregnancy,” July 2008, at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/policymakers/PDF/Briefly_PolicyBrief_RacialEthnicDisparities.pdf (September 2, 2008).
7. Rector *et al.*, “The Harmful Effects of Early Sexual Activity.”
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*

Parents Remain Influential Regarding Teens' Decisions About Sex

When asked, "When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is the most influential?" about half of high schoolers surveyed indicated their parents. Older teens were more likely to be influenced by their friends.



Note: The percentages, as reported in "With One Voice 2007," do not total 100 percent.

Source: Bill Albert, "With Once Voice 2007: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, February 2007, pp. 7–8, at http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pubs/WOV2007_fulltext.pdf (September 1, 2008).

Chart 2 • B 2194 heritage.org

assumptions faulty, they tend to disregard important factors that have been linked to reduced teen sexual activity. A particularly noticeable omission is parental influence.

Parents, as teens themselves reveal, are the ones who have the most influence on their children's decisions about sex. Indeed, two-thirds of all teens share their parents' values on this topic.

When it comes to talking about teen sex, both teens and parents report high levels of communication. Parents, however, tend to perceive a greater level of communication than do teens. Nearly all parents (90 percent) report having had a helpful conversation about delaying sex and avoiding pregnancy with their teenage children, compared to 71 percent of teens who report having had such a conversation with their parents.¹⁰ Many parents are also unaware of their teens' actual behavior. In a study of 700 teens in Philadelphia, 58 percent of the teens reported being sexually active, while only one-third of their mothers believed they were.¹¹

The empirical evidence on the association between parental influences and adolescents' sexual behavior is strong. Parental factors that appear to offer strong protection against the onset of early sexual activity include an intact family structure; parents' disapproval of adolescent sex; teens' sense of belonging to and satisfaction with their families; parental monitoring; and, to a lesser extent, parent-child communication about teen sex and its consequences.

That parents play a role in teen sex points to at least two significant policy implications. First, programs and policies that seek to delay sexual activity or to prevent teen pregnancy or STDs should encourage and strengthen family structure and parental involvement. Doing so may increase these efforts' overall effectiveness. Conversely, programs and policies that implicitly or explicitly discourage parental involvement, such as dispensing contraceptives to adolescents without parental consent or notice, contradict the weight of social science evidence and may prove to be counterproductive and potentially harmful to teens.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. 11–12.

11. James Jaccard, Patricia J. Dittus, and Vivian V. Gordon, "Parent-Adolescent Congruency in Reports of Adolescent Sexual Behavior and in Communications About Sexual Behavior," *Child Development*, Vol. 69, No. 1 (February 1998), pp. 247–261.

Research Findings

A Research Note. Social scientists are primarily concerned with the question of causality. For example, does parental disapproval of teen sex independently cause teens to delay sexual activity? Causality, however, is difficult to establish in social science research. Using statistical methods and appropriate data sources, social scientists infer certain reasonable conclusions from their research. The degree of confidence with which they draw inferred conclusions depends largely on data quality, study design, and statistical method.

The research on parental influences and teen sexuality is extensive. A substantial portion of the research is based on cross-sectional data, which capture information at one point in time and provide a “snapshot” view. As such, they limit researchers’ ability to draw stronger conclusions. At best, cross-sectional data offer evidence of correlations, e.g., parental disapproval of teen sex is associated with delayed sexual initiation. Longitudinal surveys, on the other hand, follow the same group of individuals over time, which allows researchers to infer stronger findings. This paper mostly highlights findings from studies that use longitudinal data, which offer more rigorous conclusions.

Family Structure. A key parental influence on teen sex is family structure, for example, the number of parents living with, and their relationship to (biological, adoptive, step, or unrelated), the children in the families. The link between childhood family structure and the timing of sexual initiation has been well researched and documented.¹² Research findings from studies that use a variety of data sources and that account for other factors associated with teen sexual behavior, such as gender,

race and ethnicity, age, and family background, suggest the following:

- Adolescents living in intact families are more likely to delay sexual activity than peers living in other family forms. Parents’ marital transitions, the absence of a natural father in the home, and the duration of such absences are significant as well.
- The protective influence of the intact family structure appears to vary by gender, age, and ethnicity, with stronger effects for adolescent girls, white teenagers, and younger teens.
- Teens living in intact families also tend to report fewer sexual experiences and partners, and are less likely to report being infected with a sexually transmitted disease, compared to peers in non-intact families. This is primarily because teens in intact families tend to delay sexual activity.
- Adolescent girls in intact families are less likely to become pregnant and give birth outside of marriage compared to peers in non-intact families.

Yet, as sociologist Paul Amato notes, “[p]erhaps the most profound change in the American family over the past four decades has been the decline in the share of children growing up in households with both biological parents.”¹³ In 1960, 88 percent of all children lived with two parents, compared to 68 percent in 2007.¹⁴ In 1960, 5 percent of all children born were to unmarried mothers. That figure rose to 38.5 percent in 2006.¹⁵ Thus, policies and programs that bolster the intact family structure and promote healthy marriages may reduce teen sexual activity.

Parental Values and Disapproval of Teen Sex. Studies have demonstrated a robust correlation between parental values on teen sex and teen sexual

12. For a comprehensive review of the academic literature, see Samuel W. Sturgeon, “The Relationship Between Family Structure and Adolescent Sexual Activity,” Heritage Foundation *FamilyFacts.org Special Report* No.1, forthcoming. The report summarizes findings from over one hundred empirical studies, nearly all of which appeared in peer-reviewed academic publications. This section summarizes research findings from the forthcoming report.

13. Paul R. Amato, “The Impact of Family Formation Change on the Cognitive, Social, and Emotional Well-Being of the Next Generation,” *The Future of Children*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 2005), p. 76.

14. U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Time Series, Living Arrangements of Children, Table CH-1, at <http://www.census.gov/population/socdemo/hh-fam/ch1.xls> (September 2, 2008).

15. S. J. Ventura and C. A. Bachrach, “Nonmarital Childbearing in the United States, 1940–99,” *National Vital Statistics Report*, Vol. 48, No. 16 (2000), Table 1; E. H. Brady, J. A. Martin, and S. J. Ventura, “Births: Preliminary Data for 2006,” *National Vital Statistics Reports*, Vol. 56, No. 7 (2007), Table 1.

behavior. Using longitudinal data, more recent research indicates that parental disapproval, particularly mothers' disapproval (fathers' values are less well studied), of their teens having sex appears to delay the onset of sexual activity. Importantly, the association is between teens' *perceptions* of their parents' disapproval, not necessarily parents' actual views, and delayed initiation. This does not mean that parental values are unimportant. In fact, research shows that, overall, parents' beliefs about teen sex are a significant predictor of teens' perceptions. (Another predictor appears to be strong parent-child relationships during early adolescence.)¹⁶

Perceived parental disapproval of teen sex may also reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.¹⁷ The evidence suggests that adolescent girls tend to benefit more from this protective influence than do boys.

- For example, in a study of 8,200 middle and high school students nationwide, virgin teens who perceived stronger disapproval from their mothers during the baseline interview¹⁸ were less likely to have started sexual activity and report a

pregnancy one year later than teens who viewed their mothers as having a more liberal attitude toward their engagement in sexual activity.¹⁹

Studying younger and older teens together, as in the previous study, may bias the results, as older abstinent teens may have different characteristics than same-aged peers who are sexually experienced.

- Another study, of younger adolescents ages 14 and 15, revealed similar findings, though the effect only appears statistically significant²⁰ for girls.²¹ This relationship held true even considering adolescent girls' race, family structure, and dating history, as well as their mothers' education and religiosity, mothers' report of communication with their daughters on topics related to teen sex and birth control and of mother-daughter relationship quality, and the frequency of mothers' communication with the parents of their daughters' friends.
- A third study, using longitudinal data, analyzed children ages 12 to 16 from the San Francisco

16. Renee E. Sieving, Clea S. McNeely, and Robert Wm. Blum, "Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut," *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, Vol. 154 (August 2000), pp. 809–815.

17. Melina Bersamin, Michael Todd, Deborah A. Fisher *et al.*, "Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 70 (February 2008), pp. 97–112; Erin Calhoun Davis and Lisa V. Friel, "Adolescent Sexuality: Disentangling the Effects of Family Structure and Family Context," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 63 (August 2001), pp. 669–681; Patricia J. Dittus and James Jaccard, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Maternal Disapproval of Sex: Relationship to Sexual Outcomes," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 26 (2000), pp. 268–278; Laura Fingerson, "Do Mothers' Opinions Matter in Teens' Sexual Activity?" *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 26 (October 2005), pp. 947–974; James Jaccard, Patricia Dittus, and Vivian V. Gordon, "Maternal Correlates of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior," *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (July–August 1996), pp. 159–185; Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, "Parent-Adolescent Congruency in Reports of Adolescent Sexual Behavior and in Communications About Sexual Behavior"; Clea McNeely, Marcia L. Shew, Trisha Beuhring *et al.*, "Mothers' Influence on the Timing of First Sex Among 14- and 15-Year-Olds," *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 31 (2002), pp. 256–265; Mark D. Regnerus and Laura B. Luchies, "The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents' First Sex," *Journal of Family Issues*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (February 2006), pp. 159–183; Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, "Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut"; Patricia Dittus, James Jaccard, and Vivian V. Gordon, "The Impact of African American Fathers on Adolescent Sexual Behavior," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (1997), pp. 445–465; and Michael Resnick, Peter S. Bearman, Robert Wm. Blum *et al.*, "Protecting Adolescents From Harm," *Journal of American Medical Association*, Vol. 278, No. 10 (September 10, 1997), pp. 823–832.

18. Adolescents were asked: "How would your mother feel about your having sex at this time in your life?" and "How would your mother feel about your using birth control at this time in your life?" Dittus and Jaccard, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Maternal Disapproval of Sex," p. 271.

19. Dittus and Jaccard, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Maternal Disapproval of Sex."

20. Statistical significance indicates the probability that an estimated difference, a finding, actually exists versus it being due to random chance.

21. McNeely, Shew, Beuhring *et al.*, "Mothers' Influence on the Timing of First Sex Among 14- and 15-Year-Olds."

Bay and the Los Angeles County areas, and found that perceived parental disapproval of teen sex also reduced the likelihood of teens engaging in oral sex one year later.²²

As noted earlier, parents and teens differ in their perceptions of the level of communication about teen sex issues and actual behavior that takes place. Thus, to ensure that teens perceive their parents' disapproval of teen sex accurately, parents should unequivocally convey their values to their teens. Mixed messages could potentially diminish any positive effects parental values have on delaying teen sexual behavior. In a national poll, teens were asked: "Suppose a parent or other adult tells you/a teen the following: 'Don't have sex, but if you do you should use birth control for protection.' Do you think this is a message that encourages you/teens to have sex?"²³ One teen in two responded affirmatively, indicating that, to many teens, a qualified "no" translates into a perceived "yes."

Parent-Child Relationships. A third robust protective parental element is strong parent-child relationships.²⁴ Parent-child relationship quality or connectedness is often measured by the level of satisfaction teens and their parents experience in their relationships with one another; the amount of warmth, love, affection, and communication teens report receiving from their parents; and the level of parental involvement in their children's lives. In a

thorough review of the research on family relationships and teen pregnancy risk published before 2000, Dr. Brent Miller and colleagues write:

There is marked consistency in this body of more than 20 studies...all but a few indicate that parent/child closeness is associated with reduced adolescent pregnancy risk through teens remaining sexually abstinent, postponing intercourse, having fewer sexual partners, or using contraception more consistently.²⁵

Four recent longitudinal studies, analyzing the same nationally representative survey of students in grades seven through 11 across the nation, report the following:

- Teens who reported greater satisfaction in their relationships with their mothers were less likely to have sex and become pregnant (and were also more likely to use birth control during their most recent sexual experience) one year later than peers who felt less satisfied in their relationships with their mothers.²⁶
- Fourteen- and 15-year-old adolescent girls whose mothers reported greater satisfaction in their relationships with their teens were less likely to initiate sexual activity one year later than peers of mothers who felt less satisfied in their relationships with their daughters.²⁷

22. Bersamin, Todd, Fisher *et al.*, "Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior."

23. Albert, "With One Voice, 2007," p. 20.

24. Davis and Friel, "Adolescent Sexuality"; Dittus and Jaccard, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Maternal Disapproval of Sex"; Fingerson, "Do Mothers' Opinions Matter in Teens' Sexual Activity?"; Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, "Maternal Correlates of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior"; Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, "Parent-Adolescent Congruency in Reports of Adolescent Sexual Behavior and in Communications About Sexual Behavior"; Christine M. Markham, Susan R. Tortolero, S. Liliana Escobar-Chaves *et al.*, "Family Connectedness and Sexual Risk-Taking Among Urban Youth Attending Alternative School," *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2003), pp. 174-179; McNeely, Shew, Beuhring *et al.*, "Mothers' Influence on the Timing of First Sex Among 14- and 15-Year-Olds"; J. Barnet, D. R. Papini, and E. Gbur, "Familial Correlates of Sexually Active Pregnant and Nonpregnant Adolescents," *Adolescence*, Vol. 26, No. 102 (1991), pp. 457-72; Regnerus and Luchies, "The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents' First Sex"; Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, "Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut"; Dawn Upchurch, Carol S. Aneshensel, Clea A. Sucoff *et al.*, "Neighborhood and Family Contexts of Adolescent Sexual Activity," *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (November 1999), pp. 920-933.

25. Brent C. Miller, Brad Benson, and Kevin A. Galbraith, "Family Relationships and Adolescent Pregnancy Risk: A Research Synthesis," *Developmental Review*, Vol. 21 (2001), p. 3.

26. Dittus and Jaccard, "Adolescents' Perceptions of Maternal Disapproval of Sex."

27. McNeely, Shew, Beuhring *et al.*, "Mothers' Influence on the Timing of First Sex Among 14- and 15-Year-Olds."

- For teenage girls, but not for boys, higher quality father-daughter relationships, but not mother-daughter relationships, tended to postpone sexual activity. This connection appeared to be explained by the observation that adolescent girls who have better relationships with their fathers also have fewer dating relationships, associate more guilt with having sex, and share more meals with their parents relative to peers who reported lower quality father-daughter relationships.²⁸
 - Younger teenage girls and boys as well as older teenage boys who felt more connected to their mothers tended to delay sexual activity compared to similar-age peers who felt less connected to their mothers.²⁹
- Parental Monitoring and Parenting Practices.** Most research on parental monitoring—for example, the extent to which parents know the whereabouts and activities of their children outside home and school—parental supervision, and parental rules shows a positive correlation between these factors and reduced teen sexual activity.³⁰ For studies that do not demonstrate such a relationship, Dr. Miller posits that “excessive or coercive” parental control might actually lead to negative outcomes.³¹ The following findings come from several recent longitudinal studies:
- In a study of some 750 children ages 13 and older, adolescents who received more parental monitoring were more likely to delay sexual initiation one year later compared to peers who received less monitoring from their parents. This applied to dating teens as well. However, teen sexual behavior appeared uninfluenced by parenting style, either supportive (characterized by frequently praising and spending time with the child) or coercive (characterized by spanking, yelling, or arguing with the child) parenting.³²
 - In a study of nearly 900 youths, ages 12 to 16, from the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles County areas, those who reported more parental monitoring or those whose parents limited their television were less likely to engage in oral sex one year later compared to peers whose parents were less knowledgeable about their whereabouts outside school and home or whose parents did not limit their television viewing. While parental monitoring was not associated with sexual initiation in this study, parental limitations on and co-viewing of television appeared to be associated with delayed sexual initiation.³³
 - In a study of young minority adolescent boys from low-income areas of Chicago, Boston, and San Antonio, those who reported greater levels of parental monitoring were less likely to initiate

28. Regnerus and Luchies, “The Parent-Child Relationship and Opportunities for Adolescents’ First Sex.”

29. Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, “Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut.”

30. Angela J. Huebner and Laurie W. Howell, “Examining the Relationship Between Adolescent Sexual Risk-Taking and Perceptions of Monitoring, Communication and Parenting Styles,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 33 (2003), pp. 71–78; Monica A. Longmore, Wendy D. Manning, and Peggy C. Giordano, “Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens’ Dating and Sexual Initiation: A Longitudinal Analysis,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 63 (May 2001), pp. 322–335; Kathleen Boyce Rodgers, “Parenting Processes Related to Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors of Adolescent Males and Females,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (February 1999), pp. 99–109; Laura D. Pittman and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale, “African American Adolescent Girls in Impoverished Communities: Parenting Style and Adolescent Outcomes,” *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2001), pp. 199–224; Eric P. Baumer and Scott J. South, “Community Effects on Youth Sexual Activity,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 62 (May 2001), pp. 540–554; Bersamin, Todd, Fisher *et al.*, “Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior”; Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, “Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut”; Ralph J. DiClemente, Gina M. Wingood, Richard Crosby *et al.*, “Parental Monitoring: Association with Adolescents’ Risk Behavior,” *Pediatrics*, Vol. 107 (2001), pp. 1363–1368; Brenda J. Lohman and Amanda Billings, “Protective and Risk Factors Associated with Adolescent Boys’ Early Sexual Debut and Risky Sexual Behaviors,” *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, Vol. 37, No. 6 (July 2008), pp. 723–735.

31. Miller, Benson, and Galbraith, “Family Relationships and Adolescent Pregnancy Risk,” p. 9.

32. Longmore, Manning, and Giordano, “Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens’ Dating and Sexual Initiation.”

33. Bersamin, Todd, Fisher *et al.*, “Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior.”

sexual activity before age 15 compared to peers who received less parental monitoring. Parental monitoring also had an indirect influence on engaging in risky sexual behavior through reduced substance use and school problems.³⁴

- In a cross-sectional sample of black female adolescents ages 14 and 18, parental monitoring was related to a reduction in testing positive for STDs.³⁵

Parent-Child Communication. The evidence on parent-child communication, particularly communication about sex and birth control, is more mixed.³⁶ Reviewing 30 studies published before 2000, Dr. Brent Miller and colleagues summarize the research as follows:

Results across these studies are complex and discrepant. Perhaps the clearest conclusion that can be drawn from these studies is that there is no simple direct effect. That is, parent-teen communication about sexual issues has no uniform or consistent effect on adolescent pregnancy risk that holds across gender, race, source of data (parent or child report), and especially across parental attitudes and values.³⁷

While some studies have reported an inverse correlation between communication and teen sexual activity—more communication, less teen sexual activity—others have reported a positive association—more communication, more teen sexual activity. Neither relationship should be interpreted as causal, for example, communication causes teens to engage in sexual activity. Still other studies have reported no significant correlations. The following studies present some of the mixed results:

- In a study of teens, ages 12 to 16, from the San Francisco Bay and Los Angeles County areas, the teens were asked about the quality of their general communication with their parents as well as whether they and their parents had talked about sex-related topics in the past year. Teens who reported better quality communication with their mothers were less likely to engage in oral sex one year later. General father-teen communication did not appear to affect teen oral sex, nor did general parent-child communication appear to have an effect on sexual initiation. However, teens who talked with their parents about sexual issues in the past year were *more* likely to engage in oral sex and sexual activity compared to peers who did not have such discussions.³⁸

34. Lohman and Billings, “Protective and Risk Factors Associated with Adolescent Boys’ Early Sexual Debut and Risky Sexual Behaviors.”

35. DiClemente, Wingood, Crosby *et al.*, “Parental Monitoring: Association with Adolescents’ Risk Behavior.”

36. Bersamin, Todd, Fisher *et al.*, “Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior”; Davis and Friel, “Adolescent Sexuality”; Fingerson, “Do Mothers’ Opinions Matter in Teens’ Sexual Activity?”; Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, James Jaccard, Patricia Dittus *et al.*, “Parental Expertise, Trustworthiness and Accessibility: Parent-Adolescent Communication and Adolescent Risk Behavior,” *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 68 (December 2006), pp. 1229–1246; Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, “Maternal Correlates of Adolescent Sexual and Contraceptive Behavior”; Jaccard, Dittus, and Gordon, “Parent-Adolescent Congruency in Reports of Adolescent Sexual Behavior and in Communications about Sexual Behavior”; Peter S. Karofsky, Lan Zeng, and Michael Kosorok, “Relationship Between Adolescent-Parental Communication and Initiation of First Intercourse by Adolescent,” *Journal of Adolescent Health*, Vol. 28 (2000), pp. 41–45; Longmore, Manning, and Giordano, “Preadolescent Parenting Strategies and Teens’ Dating and Sexual Initiation”; McNeely and Blum, “Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut”; Barnett and Papini, “Familial Correlates of Sexually Active Pregnant and Nonpregnant Adolescents”; Rodgers, “Parenting Processes Related to Sexual Risk-Taking Behaviors of Adolescent Males and Females”; Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, “Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut”; Daniel J. Whitaker and Kim S. Miller, “Parent-Adolescent Discussions About Sex and Condoms: Impact on Peer Influences of Sexual Risk Behavior,” *Journal of Adolescent Research*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (March 2000), pp. 251–273; Deborah Holtzman and Richard Rubinson, “Parent and Peer Communication Effects on AIDS-Related Behavior Among U.S. High School Students,” *Family Planning Perspectives*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (November–December 1995), pp. 235–268.

37. Miller, Benson, and Galbraith, “Family Relationships and Adolescent Pregnancy Risk,” pp. 10, 13.

38. Bersamin, Todd, Fisher *et al.*, “Parenting Practices and Adolescent Sexual Behavior.”

- A study of some 200 adolescents and young adults from Madison, Wisconsin, found that general parent-child communication appeared to delay sexual activity over time.³⁹
- Two longitudinal studies of a national representative survey of teens, one examining younger adolescents and the other, eighth through 11th graders, did not find any direct links between mother-teen communication about sex-related topics and teen sexual behavior. When mothers recommended a specific type of birth control to their teens, however, teens tended to perceive less disapproval from their mothers regarding teen sex, which, in turn, appeared to have an encouraging effect on initiating sexual activity.⁴⁰
- Interestingly, one cross-sectional study of some 600 middle school students from the South Bronx in New York City found that when mothers talked to their teens about the moral and social consequences of early sexual activity, teens were more likely to delay sexual initiation. Talking about the physical and health risks associated with early sexual activity did not appear to affect teens' behavior.⁴¹

Summary. Clearly, the research on parental influences and teen sexual behavior is rich and nuanced. A few broad trends emerge:

- The intact family structure is associated with delayed and reduced levels of teen sexual activity and reduced risk of teen pregnancy.
- Parental disapproval of teen sex, specifically teens' perceptions of their mothers' disapproval, is linked to delayed sexual activity and reduced risk of teen pregnancy.
- Higher levels of parent-teen relationship satisfaction and a strong connection between teens and their mothers are associated with delayed sexual initiation.

- Greater parental monitoring and rules appear to be correlated with reduced teen sexual activity, though the evidence is mixed.
- The evidence on parent-child communication, in general or specifically about sexual issues, is mixed. Here, the relationship may vary by the content and degree of discussion as well as other factors.

What Parents Should Do

From a parent's perspective, the implications are clear: Parents can, in fact, influence their children's sexual behavior and offer protection against the negative consequences of early sexual activity. The two strongest links appear to be parental values regarding teen sex and parents' relationships with their children. Consequently, parents should:

- Avoid sending ambiguous and mixed messages about teen sex;
- Convey clearly to their teens their values on this subject;
- Focus on imparting clearly defined values—simply discussing sex, contraceptives, and physiology does not necessarily protect teens; and
- Seek to strengthen their relationships with their teenage children.

What Policymakers Should Do

From a policy perspective, the implications are clear as well: Parents can influence teen sexual behavior and related outcomes. Policymakers should:

- Include a component on healthy marriage, stable family formation, and parental involvement in programs and policies that seek to delay teen sexual activity or prevent teen-sex related negative outcomes.
- Oppose programs and policies that discourage parental involvement. For example, policies that dispense contraceptives to teens, in school-based

39. Karofsky, Zeng, and Kosorok, "Relationship Between Adolescent-Parental Communication and Initiation of First Intercourse by Adolescent."

40. Sieving, McNeely, and Blum, "Maternal Expectations, Mother-Child Connectedness, and Adolescent Sexual Debut"; McNeely, Shew, Beuhring *et al.*, "Mothers' Influence on the Timing of First Sex Among 14- and 15-Year-Olds."

41. Guilamo-Ramos, Jaccard, Dittus *et al.*, "Parental Expertise, Trustworthiness and Accessibility."

clinics and other settings, without parental consent or notification are clearly contrary to the weight of social science evidence and might weaken a demonstrated protective influence against early teen sexual activity and related outcomes.⁴²

- Endorse programs and policies that promote strong marriage and stable family formation.

Conclusion

Nationally, a non-trivial portion of teens engage in sexual activity before the age of 13. By ninth grade, one teen in three has had sex, and by 12th grade, two in three. Early sexual activity is associated with a host of enduring negative consequences that include increased risks of psychological and physical harm, teen pregnancy and unwed childbearing, poverty, and marital instability later in life.

Social science research over the decades suggests that parents can play a protective role in delaying

early teen sexual activity and reducing the risk of harmful consequences. Importantly, the empirical evidence indicates that childhood family structure, teens' perceptions of parental disapproval of teen sex, and the quality of the parent-child relationship appear to affect teen sexual behavior. The evidence on parental monitoring and parent-child communication, in general and specifically about sex-related topics, appears more mixed.

Consequently, programs and policies focused on reducing teen sexual activity and the damaging results should encourage parents' presence and involvement in the lives of their children. Policies that discourage parental involvement, such as dispensing contraceptives to teens without parental consent, contradict the weight of social science evidence and should be opposed.

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42. For an example of such legislative effort, see Daniel P. Moloney, "SCHIP Expansion: More Birth Control for Minors, Less Involvement by Parents," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1715, December 3, 2007, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/HealthCare/wm1715.cfm>.