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## More teens have sex and fewer parents know

**Behind a study that finds even 12- to 14-year-olds are active is a communications lapse.**

By [Alexandra Marks](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

**NEW YORK** — When Natalia Wagner was 10, one of her friends became pregnant. The young girl had been taken advantage of by her older brother's friend.

By the time she was 13, so many of her peers were having sex - or at least talking about it in their old steel-mill town in central Florida - that she started a teen-pregnancy prevention program.

Now 15, she is unfazed by the recent report that found 20 percent of teens 14 years old and younger have had sex. "I think there's actually more than that, but a lot of kids aren't honest about it," she says.

But what did bother Natalia, who's now as practiced at counseling girls in the bathroom as she is lobbying legislators in Tallahassee, was the way many adults reacted to the report by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. They seemed genuinely stunned that people so young were sexually active.

"Parents don't believe their kids are the ones that are doing it, and they are," she says. "That's what creates a big conflict - a big, big conflict."

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While the overall rates of teen pregnancy and sexual activity have declined over the past 20 years, the surveys usually focused only on adolescents in high school. At the same time, anecdotal evidence was mounting that younger teens were increasingly active. That prompted the National Campaign study. The headline was a shocker: One in 5 kids ages 12, 13, and 14 have had sex.

But experts contend that below the headline lies an even more disturbing message: that in our increasingly sexually explicit culture where kids are bombarded daily with sly innuendo about sex in everything from billboards to sitcoms, most parents are still uncomfortably Victorian when they approach their children about the birds and the bees. In fact, two-thirds of the parents of the sexually active 14-year-olds had no idea their children were sexually active.

"What is really clear from this report is that it's still the voices of parents and other adults that are stunningly absent in the lives of many of our kids," says Michael Resnick, director of the National Teen Pregnancy Prevention Research Center at the University of Minnesota. "Parents first and foremost are the No. 1 sex educators of their children. But far too many do this by offering a course in silence, or simple monosyllabic answers to something deeply felt, very complex, and very important to many young people."

### The repercussions of silence

That parental awkwardness can have profound consequences. Young sexually active teens are at a much higher risk for pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases than those that choose to wait. They're also more likely to engage in risky behaviors: Eighteen percent of sexually active youths report drinking, 29 percent report having smoked regularly, and more than 40 percent have tried marijuana, according to the National Campaign report.

Another new report by the Heritage Foundation also found that sexually active teens were more likely to be depressed and more likely to have attempted suicide.

"The real take-home message here is that even if young adolescents look grown-up and are pushing to act grown-up, they're not," says Sarah Brown, director of the National Campaign in Washington.

The advice experts offer about when to start talking about intimacy could make some parents bristle. Dr. Resnick says that as soon as children start asking questions, which could be as young as 3 years old, parents should be engaging them in thoughtful, although age-appropriate, conversations.

"Kids are so good at giving us the impression that they are more worldly and sophisticated than generations past - and they do have a superficial sophistication because of their level of exposure," he

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says. "But the process of normal adolescent development is still the same, in that kids slowly develop the ability to interpret, to think abstractly and project their thinking into the future. That's why parents are needed now more than ever."

### A 14-year-old's story

"Michelle," a tall, lean 14-year-old, now believes she's extremely fortunate to have both a grandmother and several mentors who are able to help her navigate through the world. She has a boyfriend who is two years older than she. They had talked about waiting, but nine months ago, they decided they wouldn't.

"It was just in that moment," she says. They used a condom that first time. And as soon as her grandmother learned that Michelle was active, she got her on birth control. But when the counselors in the after-school program she attends learned what was up, they challenged her.

"[Mahisha] asked me if I could stop, and I said yes, and I did," she says. Mahisha Sapp is a counselor at the Blossom Program in Brooklyn. She spent a lot of time talking to Michelle about the emotional consequences of her behavior - and that had an effect. Michelle decided not to have sex again until she's older and sure she's with the right person.

"I don't really have to do that to become a woman," she says.

Michelle also wishes now that she had waited. That's not uncommon: The National Campaign study found that 81 percent of sexually active 12- to 14-year-olds wish they had waited.

"A lot of these teens that do have sex at an early age are prime candidates for further abstinence messages," says Jennifer Manlove, a senior researcher at the Child Trends, a research organization in Washington.

That's the message that Natalia Wagner is determined to get across to lawmakers when she goes to Washington next month as a youth leader on teen-pregnancy issues. It's also what she tells the parents and other adults that she comes across in her work.

"Talk to your kids, be comfortable with the subject of sex, because if you're not comfortable with it, they won't be," she says. "And if they're not comfortable talking to you, make sure they know there are other people that can give them the resources they need to help them to make healthy decisions."



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