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Another View

Parents can be the antidote to media's message.

by Sarah Brown, CEO, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

Last Sunday, I spent five hours at a cramped, crazy, and chaotic NBC studio taping a show dedicated to discussing this summer's surprise hit reality show, "The Baby Borrowers." Although not without its detractors, the show reveals in living color why teens are best advised to postpone parenthood and it does so without being preachy or annoying. I'm a big fan.

Of course, anyone with a pulse realizes that "The Baby Borrowers" is only one of many cultural comets that have recently streaked into the nation's consciousness and reminded us all about teen pregnancy. From the Gloucester teen pregnancy "pact" (probably not true) to Jamie Lynn Spears' pregnancy, pregnant teens have been front and center.

This enormous attention has led to an avalanche of finger-pointing and recrimination. Not surprisingly, Hollywood and the media have been cited as the major cause of all this.

Nonetheless, simply blaming Hollywood, the media and celebrity culture for our nation's high rate of teen pregnancy — the "Juno effect," in shorthand — is, well, too simple.

If you believe that media has become raunchier over the past 15 years, and that our crude pop culture is the root cause of teen pregnancy, then why did teen sexual behavior improve so dramatically over that same time period?

In recent years, teen sex has decreased, teen contraceptive use has increased, and teen pregnancies have plummeted (although there was some bad news last year — the birth rate among teens went up a bit). Mind you, all of this good news occurred during the Spears, Lohan administration.

Figuring out a more balanced, reasonable explanation than Hollywood is entirely the cause is critical because even with all the progress over the last 15 years, it is still the case that 3 in 10 teen girls gets pregnant at least once before her 20th birthday.

A more sensible view is that while media is clearly not the only cause of teen pregnancy, it does influence overall social standards and values. Popular culture and media suggest what is normal, acceptable and, of course, cool. Over the course of a year, teenagers spend more time with media than they do in school, so it makes sense that what they see online, in movies and on television has an impact—but it's not the sole influence on teen sexual behavior.

In fact, the media can actually help. Seventy-six percent of all teens say they wish the media showed more about the consequences of sex.

In many of their favorite shows, there is a lot of talking about sex, wanting to have sex and actually having sex, but the consequences of sex, including the stress and impact of an unwanted pregnancy, are rarely shown.

This is a major missed opportunity.

Beyond media and the obvious need for good sex education and health services, we suggest encouraging parents to be more parental.

Parents are the closest thing we have to a magic bullet in our battle to prevent too-early pregnancy and parenthood. Moreover, teens themselves repeatedly say that it is their own parents — more than the media — who most influence their decisions about sex.

As a first step, parents should help young people understand and interpret the media culture they are consuming.

Media is a great way to start helpful conversations, and parents should use it to their advantage. Here's an idea: this Tuesday sit down and watch ABC Family's "Secret Life of the American Teen" with your child. Discuss. Repeat the following Tuesday.

In addition: be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes. Encourage your children to delay sex and stress that if they are sexually active, they must use contraception carefully, every time.

Talk openly and honestly with your sons as well as your daughters. Emphasize that especially in this tough economy, education comes before babies.

And finally, never underestimate the great need that children at all ages feel for a close relationship with their parents and for their parents' guidance, approval and support. It's never too late.

So, before blaming television, the movies and the celebrity culture for teen pregnancy, we all need to make sure that we are having many conversations with our kids — an 18-year conversation in fact — about sex, love, values, relationships, pregnancy, childbearing and, yes, media influence. Start at home. Tonight.