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Teen Boys' Fear of Impregnating Girls Drops, CDC Says

By Ellen Gibson

Teenage boys are becoming less worried about getting a girl pregnant, with a quarter saying they would be pleased if it happened.

A higher percentage of boys ages 15 to 19 also agreed that it's acceptable for unmarried girls to have babies, according to a report released today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that compared teens' attitudes toward sex in 2006 to 2008 to those in a survey six years earlier. The report also showed an increase in the number of teens using the unreliable "rhythm method," which leads a quarter of users to get pregnant within a year.

The boys' attitudes and the increased use of risky ways to avoid pregnancies contrast with the trend observed between 1988 and 2002, when the researchers saw a steady decline in so-called "sexual risk behaviors," the report said. Overall, the number of teens having sex and their use of contraceptives was unchanged from the earlier survey, according to the data.

"Anytime you see a loss of momentum compared to the straightforward improvements of the past, you think that efforts to motivate teens to use contraception need to be redoubled," said Joyce Abma, a social scientist at the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics and the paper's lead author. "On the other hand, there could be a point at which you've reached a lot of teens and the ones left are the hardest to reach."

National Survey

The data in the report, known as the National Survey of Family Growth, was collected through in-person interviews with 2,767 teenagers ages 15 to 19. The survey is taken every six to seven years.

Among never-married females, 42 percent reported having sex at least once. The proportion of males in that age group

who have had sex was 43 percent. Among those who abstained, the most common reason they cited was that sex was "against religion or morals."

The number of boys who chose "don't want to get female pregnant" as the reason for avoiding sex fell by half to 12 percent from the last survey. Childbearing outside of marriage was acceptable to 64 percent of males in the current survey, up 14 percentage points from 2002, the Atlanta-based agency said.

Those attitudes show boys are less worried about an unwanted pregnancy, Abma said in a telephone interview.

'Hair-Raising'

"This ambivalence is one of the most hair-raising headlines from this report," said Bill Albert, chief program officer for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, a Washington-based advocacy group. "It explains why 3 in 10 girls in the U.S. become pregnant by age 20."

The current study did show a handful of improvements in teens' sex behavior since 2002. The use of more than one form of birth control -- in most cases, the condom and the pill -- increased 73 percent. Females also experimented with a wider variety of contraceptive methods: 11 percent said they'd tried patches such as Johnson & Johnson's Ortho Evra, while 7 percent had used vaginal rings such as Merck & Co.'s NuvaRing.

In addition, the percentage of unmarried males who reported using a condom during their first sexual experience rose to 82 percent in the latest study from 71 percent in 2002. The higher use may have more to do with increased awareness of sexually-transmitted diseases than pregnancy prevention, the CDC said.