

# Briefly...

## What 20-Somethings Are Saying About Pregnancy, Sex, and Childbearing: Finding from Focus Groups

Over the past several months, the National Campaign has been working with Ogilvy and Mather and TRU to learn what women and men in their twenties think about unplanned pregnancy and related issues. The findings presented here represent some of the key themes that emerged from this focus group research. The findings presented here represent some of the key themes that emerged from this focus group research. Focus groups were conducted with unmarried men and women in their 20s. Some had children already, others did not. Levels of contraception use varied. Information about the “success story” interviews we did—sessions with committed users of contraception—appear at the end of this document.

**1) Getting pregnant isn't as bad as getting an STD.** Almost without exception STDs were more feared than pregnancy. STDs are usually the first reason given when asked about using condoms:

- “My first thought is the first thing that comes to my mind is AIDS.” Comparing the idea of an STD to the idea of getting pregnant, one woman said: “It’s like I have trusted you with my life, and you bring me back something that might take my life. Whereas a child, we are bringing something into this world together.”
- Said another woman: “Having an STD is so much worse than getting pregnant. I don’t think a man would be with you if you had herpes, but having a kid isn’t as big of a deterrent.”
- More: “STDs are more serious (than pregnancy). You can’t get rid of it. They don’t go away. Some could kill me.” “If you don’t want to be pregnant there are alternatives to it. Not with some diseases.”

**2) “I’m not a kid anymore. I’ll have to step up.”** Many said that now that they’re adults, if they get pregnant by accident, they have to step up and take responsibility. Even if they don’t feel very adult right now, the world sees them as such and they have to deal with their mistakes. All felt that getting pregnant as a teen was worse—more to lose as a teen. Unlike when they were teenagers, 20-something women think they are ready and able to raise a child if need be:

- “I think of it as ‘do I want to have children?’ Maybe not right now. It’s not going to kill me if I have one, so therefore I’m not thinking about I’m not going to get pregnant because I’m going to use protection. Well if it happens, I got to deal with that.”
- Said one young woman: “I’m 28. A baby is not the worst thing that could happen to me.”
- Said many: “If it happens, it happens.”

**3) Planning is a strange concept.** We looked at the concept of “planning” as it pertains to pregnancy and found that young adults—even those who meticulously plan in other areas of their lives—don’t do so when it comes to getting pregnant or avoiding pregnancy. Participants told us that planning is for “rich people” or older people who are having trouble conceiving.

- “Planning is for people who are financially stable.”

Even those who intellectually think about or talk about planning a pregnancy don’t exhibit the behavior to match. Example: One woman we spoke to told us she had a miscarriage a couple of years ago. She said it was sad but “a really big relief”:

- “You’re relieved that you’re not pregnant anymore. We both know that relief that it wasn’t happening anymore. We want to plan this. We definitely want to plan it later.”

Still, even though she says she wants to “plan it” and she has actually been pregnant before, her contraception use is sporadic and she is fine with that. Said one of our participants who was most committed to using contraception:

- “When it comes to planning a pregnancy, you can put everything else in place first, then stop planning and let it happen.”

**4) Ambivalence is rampant.** The unmarried 20-somethings we spoke with all said they didn’t want to get pregnant but upon further examination some backed away from that assertion. Some thought that having a child would give their lives direction and purpose. Others thought it could strengthen their relationships. One man we spoke to, when presented with the idea that his behavior and his words don’t exactly match as it pertains to having/not having children:

- “I guess when it comes down to it I really wouldn’t care if I did have one.”

He wasn’t the only male who felt this way. From the women we heard similar sentiments:

- “I don’t want a baby but we’re not using condoms, just the rhythm method. So if that doesn’t work I’d just have to suck it up and have a baby.”
- Another: “I just don’t think about it. I don’t want to get pregnant but it wouldn’t be a big deal if it happened.”
- More: “I know when I ovulate but I have sex anyway. I don’t really want to have another baby. It’s just stupidity.”

**5) Confusion about contraception and fertility is overwhelming.** There is an enormous lack of accurate information among this population. Most think that withdrawal is an adequate form of birth control. Many think that all women suffer side effects from all birth control pills. Few men or women know about the female fertility cycle (some think you can’t get pregnant at certain times of the month, some think if you haven’t

been pregnant yet you probably never will be, etc.) Comments we heard from men include:

- “It’s really hard to get a girl pregnant.”
- “They ovulate a couple of days before their period. Or weeks before their period. Which is it?” “There is one day that is safe.”
- One woman told us: “I can’t take any of that stuff (hormonal birth control)—birth control and shots and things like that. You get fat and your hair falls out.”
- Few we spoke with had good things to say about Depo Provera (“the shot”) or NuvaRing (“the ring”). No one we spoke with mentioned the IUD at all. Said one man we spoke with: “I learned about all this in high school. Since then I only learn about it from TV commercials.”

**6) Women’s self esteem is a factor in condom use.** Many of the women we heard from were afraid to bring up contraception or afraid to insist on it, at the risk of losing their man or their relationship. One woman said using protection is a must when sleeping with someone new but she described that as being “selfish”:

- “There’s so many STDs and HIV going around, you obviously—you have to be little selfish upon yourself and your body and you have to know what’s going in and out.”
- Another woman said one reason people don’t use protection is because “You feel that will make him happy you want to keep him happy.”
- More: “You just feel like they want it so badly that how you’re going to keep them. That’s how he’s going to keep dating you.”

For some women, it’s as if getting pregnant when they don’t necessarily want to is not as bad a fate as not having a man around in the first place.

**7) Financial stability is a big concern but...** Not everyone makes the connection between the risk of pregnancy and the expense of parenting. Even those who do say financial stability is important before parenthood (men predominantly) don’t necessarily

take care to avoid pregnancy. Even young unmarried parents don't use protection, even as they struggle with the cost of raising children.

**8) There is nothing wrong with having children outside of marriage.** We spoke to multiple groups of unmarried parents so it's not surprising that the prevailing societal norm of getting married first and having children afterward wasn't a must. Still, the idea of being married or even living with the other parent of your child, was almost a foreign concept. Few of the young moms we talked to live with their children's fathers—even if they are still "together." Many young adults today were raised by single parents, certainly pop culture is full of these images and stories. In their minds it is a perfectly acceptable lifestyle choice.

- When asked about any 'rules' or social norms related to sex and pregnancy among her peers, one participant said the "ideal is to stick with one daddy," but "that doesn't always happen. If you make a mistake with the wrong guy, you want to try again with the right guy."

On a related note, the traditional definitions of relationships and commitment weren't necessarily relevant to this population. A number of the women we spoke to—those with and without children—wouldn't call their significant other/baby's father/boyfriend/etc. by any term that had connotations of commitment. For example, one woman said she'd been "talking to someone" for five months. Others used the term "friends with benefits." Perhaps they wanted steady relationships but were afraid to push too hard for them and afraid to label them as such. In addition, many of the men were also at odds with the concept of monogamy. We heard from men who had their main girlfriend who they "loved" but they were also sleeping with other women "on the side." The idea of a one man-one woman commitment seemed to be almost irrelevant and archaic for them.

**9) There are a million excuses.** Among the reasons we heard for not using protection: "ran out"; "heat of the moment"; "drunk"; "stupid" "feels better without a condom"; "won't see her again."

Bottom line: There is a real disconnect between the desire not to be pregnant and the actual behavior to prevent it.

Among the "success story" people we spoke to (those committed to contraception and constant in its use) the sentiments were a little different. These people were more goal-oriented in general and postponing pregnancy was one of those goals. Overall they were more confident individuals, more active in determining the direction of their lives, and more secure in their relationships. They were more likely to take responsibility for themselves and their actions.

- As one described his less-committed counterparts: "The difference is that they let life happen to them rather than making things happen."

Sixteen focus groups have taken place to date. All groups were made up of people ages 20-28, some of whom were in relationships, some of whom were living with their significant other. "Success stories" were those who used contraception consistently.

**Fort Lee, NJ:**

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Non-college, with kids 20- to 28-year-old males Mix of Co-habit	Non-College, no kids 20- to 28-year-old females Mix of Co-habit	College, w/o kids 20- to 28-year-old males Single	Success Stories 20- to 28-year-old females

**St. Louis, MO:**

Group 5	Group 6	Group 7	Group 8
Non-college, with kids 20- to 28-year-old females Mix of Co-habit	Non-College, no kids 20- to 28-year-old males Mix of Co-habit	College, w/o kids 20- to 28-year-old females Single	Success Stories 20- to 28-year-old males

**Dallas, TX:**

Group 9	Group 10	Group 11	Group 12
Non-college, with kids 20- to 28-year-old females Mix of Co-habit	Non-College, no kids 20- to 28-year-old males Mix of Co-habit	College, w/o kids 20- to 28-year-old females Single	Success Stories 20- to 28-year-old males

**Los Angeles, CA:**

Group 13	Group 14	Group 15	Group 16
Non-college, with kids 20- to 28-year-old males Mix of Co-habit	Non-College, no kids 20- to 28-year-old females Mix of Co-habit	College, w/o kids 20- to 28-year-old males Single	Success Stories 20- to 28-year-old females College