


Says:

Younger Siblings of Teen Parents:
At Increased Risk of Teen Pregnancy?

 *Eighty percent of teen mothers continue to live at home one year after giving birth,¹ and many teen parents (39% of teen mothers and 48% of teen fathers) live in households with one or more siblings.² This research brief examines the evidence that younger siblings of teen parents are at increased risk for teen pregnancy themselves, explores several theories as to why this might be, and discusses implications for prevention efforts.*

Are younger siblings of teen parents at increased risk of early pregnancy and childbearing?

According to several studies, younger siblings of teen parents are *2 to 6 times* more likely to become pregnant as teens than younger siblings of teens who are not parents.^{3,4,5,6,7} Younger siblings of teen parents also are more likely to be sexually active during early adolescence than teens whose older siblings are not teen parents.^{8,9,10,11,12} For example, one study found that 50% of younger siblings of teen parents were sexually active, compared to 24% of those whose older siblings were not teen parents.¹³ Another study concluded that, “having an adolescent childbearing sister has a stronger effect on permissive sexual attitudes and non-virgin status than does having many sexually active sisters.”¹⁴

Two studies take an interesting approach to analyzing the effect of having an older sibling teen parent. The first study looked at the effect of having multiple teen parents in the family. It found that 23% of younger sisters with two or more teen-parenting sisters were sexually experienced, compared to 16% of younger sisters with only one teen-parenting sister.¹⁵ Among younger brothers of three or more teen-parenting sisters, 27% were sexually experienced compared to 17% of younger brothers with one or two teen-parenting sisters.¹⁶

The second study divided the comparison group of teens with non-parenting siblings into two groups: those whose older sister had *never* been pregnant and those whose older sister had been pregnant, but did not give birth. The study found that younger sisters with a teen-parenting older sister were more likely to be teen parents themselves (51%)

Younger siblings of teen parents are far more likely to become pregnant as teens than younger siblings of teens who are not parents.

than younger sisters of teens that had never been pregnant (44%).¹⁷

Younger siblings of teen parents also seem to have more accepting attitudes towards early sex and teenage pregnancy compared to youth whose older siblings are not parents.^{18,19,20,21} Younger girls living with two or more sibling teen parents tend to have even more permissive sexual and childbearing attitudes than those only living with one teen parent, and they are more likely to say that they intend to become sexually active and have a child in the near future.²² In addi-

tion, younger siblings of teen parents tend to have lower educational aspirations and more problems at school than siblings of non-parenting teens.²³ Both characteristics—lower education aspirations and problems at school—are associated with increased risk of early sexual activity and pregnancy.²⁴ The risk of school problems also increases with the number of teen-parenting siblings in the family.²⁵ Other risk factors for early sex that appear to be more prevalent in younger siblings of teen parents include participating in delinquent behavior and being around peers who are sexually active.^{26,27,28}

Why Are Younger Siblings of Teen Parents At Risk?

The fact that younger siblings of teen parents are at increased risk of early sex and pregnancy may seem counterintuitive. These teens see firsthand the hardships of being a teen parent and should have less romanticized views of babies and parenting, all of which would hypothetically motivate them to avoid becoming teen parents themselves. On the other hand, as discussed below, there are many reasons why having an older sibling who is a teen parent might increase the risk.

Shared Risk Factors

One possibility is shared risk factors. Dozens of characteristics, both of the teens and of their environment, have been identified as increasing the risk of early sex and pregnancy.²⁹ Characteristics related to teens' environments and the people in their lives are likely to affect *all* children in a family. For example, if one teen's risk of pregnancy is

partially due to living in poverty, in a single parent family, or in an unsafe neighborhood, these factors will similarly increase pregnancy risk among the younger siblings living in the same household. The studies discussed above controlled for some of these risk factors, including age and pubertal status of the teen,³⁰ gender,³¹ race/ethnicity,³² family size and type,³³ socioeconomic status and receipt of welfare,³⁴ parental education,³⁵ and whether teens lived in an urban environment.³⁶ However, other factors were not controlled for, so some of the increased risk may be due to shared background characteristics.

Modeling

Another theory is that teen parents affect siblings through modeling. Many teen pregnancy prevention programs are based on Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which holds that individuals can learn new behavior (such as refusal skills or negotiation over contraceptive use) by observing the behavior of others.³⁷ Here, however, younger siblings may be learning negative behavior modeled by their older siblings. Siblings' relationships also may result in the transfer of permissive attitudes toward early sex and pregnancy, since younger siblings often look up to their older siblings for advice, support and guidance in these areas.^{38,39} Two studies have considered these factors. One found that younger sisters of teen mothers who reported a close relationship with their sister were more likely to have permissive attitudes toward childbearing than those whose relationships with their older sisters were less close.⁴⁰ However, the sec-

ond study found that a positive relationship between siblings actually increased the younger sisters' educational aspirations and had no significant effects on sexual behavior or attitudes.⁴¹ Most teen parents also model school failure—for example, 59% of teen mothers under age 18 drop out of high school.⁴² This may help explain why younger siblings of teen parents have more negative attitudes and expectations regarding school and career, compared to those whose older siblings are not teen parents.⁴³

Family Dynamics

Some younger siblings feel threatened about their place in the family when an older sibling becomes a teen parent. Younger sisters who perceive that their parents favor their older pregnant/parenting sibling are likely to mimic their older siblings' behavior.^{44, 45} Studies also have found that when extensive rivalry or jealousy exists between a teen mother and her younger sibling, the latter is more likely to engage in problem behaviors and be sexually experienced.⁴⁶

Child Care

One study found that the average younger sibling of a teen parent spent more than 10 hours a week caring for the child. In fact, the more time a younger sister spent in child care activities, the more likely she was to have pessimistic school aspirations, be sexually active, and to intend to have a child right away. Among younger brothers, however, time spent in child care activities either had no effects or was associated with more negative views toward early childbearing.⁴⁷

Parents of Teen Parents

Another theory about why younger siblings of teen parents are more likely to become teen parents themselves is that parenting styles change after a teenage daughter gives birth. One study found that parental monitoring of all children in a family decreased after one child becomes a teen parent.⁴⁸ This may be, in part, because parents end up spending considerable time caring for the grandchild—an average of 30 hours per week, according to one study.⁴⁹ Some parents may view their child becoming a teen parent as their own failure and may feel incapable of affecting their other children's sexual behavior.⁵⁰ These feelings may extend beyond their children's sexual behavior—parents of teen parents also often have lower educational and career expectations for all their children than parents whose children have not given birth.⁵¹ Mothers of teen parents were found to be less affectionate and more critical with all their children than mothers of non-childbearing teens, especially when the family was experiencing economic hardship or the mother spent many hours caring for the grandchild.⁵²

What It All Means

Research indicates that younger siblings of teen parents are at greater risk for becoming teen parents themselves than younger siblings of teens who are not parents. What can be done to reduce that risk? Given what is known about the factors that contribute to these patterns among siblings, program leaders, parents, other adults, and even

teen parents themselves should consider the following:

Program Directors: Evaluation research is scarce regarding program effectiveness in reducing pregnancy rates among teen parents' siblings. However, one program has proven effective. The California Adolescent Sibling Pregnancy Prevention Program served teens who had at least one sibling who was pregnant or already a parent. An evaluation found that younger sisters in the program were 43 percent less likely to get pregnant than younger sisters in a control group, and they were also less likely to begin having sex (see box). Program leaders can consider replicating this program in their own communities. At a minimum, they can identify participants with pregnant or parenting siblings in the programs they manage and be aware that these teens are at particular risk for early sex and pregnancy. Conversely, if a program is

serving teen parents, program directors can consider directing participants' siblings to teen pregnancy prevention programs in the community in order to reduce the likelihood that they will follow in their older siblings' footsteps.

Parents and Other Adults:

Although teens with older siblings who have been pregnant or given birth are at greater risk for early pregnancy and parenthood themselves, parents can help reduce the risk. In public opinion polls, nearly half of teens say that parents influence their decisions about sex more than anyone else, including peers and siblings. And research has found that teens who feel closely connected to their parents are more likely to abstain from sex, wait until they are older to begin having sex, and to use contraception consistently. Not surprisingly, parents of teen parents face particular challenges in this regard. Parental monitoring of

The California Adolescent Sibling Pregnancy Prevention Program served primarily Hispanic teens aged 11-17 all of whom had at least one sibling who was pregnant or was already a teen parent. Forty-four nonprofit social service agencies, community-based organizations, school districts, and county health departments administered the program, 16 of which were included in the evaluation. Each participant was provided with "case management services, academic guidance, training in decision-making skills, job placement, self-esteem enhancement, and contraceptive and sexuality education." During the nine-month evaluation period, younger sisters in the program were 43% less likely to get pregnant than younger siblings of teen parents who did not participate in the program. (There were too few pregnancies reported by male teens in either the control or intervention groups to find a significant difference.) Girls in the program also were less likely to begin having sex during the evaluation period than teens in the comparison groups. The study's authors stated that individual case management was a key contributor to the success of this program.⁵⁴

all children in a family tends to diminish after one child becomes a teen parent due, perhaps, to stress from additional demands and/or frustration because the parent feels powerless to guide their other children. Even so, parents and other adult caretakers should work to build and maintain close connections with all of their children. Parents should also understand that younger siblings often model the behavior of their parenting siblings and that teens who have a child are at high risk of having a second teen birth (nearly a quarter of teen mothers have a second birth before age 20)⁵³

Teen Parents: Older siblings are role models for their younger brothers and sisters and can “teach” them

both positive and negative behaviors. Those teens who become parents are well-positioned to talk candidly with their siblings about the challenges they face and the benefits of delaying childbearing until adulthood. Teen parents also can help educate their peers. Some teen pregnancy prevention programs have trained teen parents to speak in schools about the realities of their lives and the advantages of delaying parenthood. Care should be taken, however, so that teen parents are not made to feel hopeless about or criticized for their own life course.

Conclusion

When it comes to sibling’s risk of teen pregnancy, there is still much

to learn. For instance, it would be helpful to know if other programs exist that include a prevention component specifically for siblings of teen parents and, if so, whether they are effective and what makes them effective. Regarding teen parents’ influence on their younger siblings, more information on the effects of gender, age differences, and relationship quality would be informative. Even with the paucity of existing research on the topic, what is known clearly indicates that younger siblings of teen parents are important targets for prevention efforts because they are at increased risk for becoming teen parents themselves. Efforts, attention, and resources should be allocated accordingly.

About the Putting What Works to Work Project

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy funded, in part, by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Through PWWTW, the National Campaign is translating research on teen pregnancy prevention and related issues into user-friendly materials for practitioners, policymakers, and advocates. As part of this initiative, the *Science Says* series summarizes recent research in short, easy-to-understand briefs.

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About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

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