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## The Association between Parent, Family, and Peer Religiosity and Teenagers' Sexual Experience and Contraceptive Use

## Highlights

- Teens whose parents hold strong religious beliefs are less likely to have sex<sup>1</sup> before age 18 than their peers whose parents have religious beliefs that are not as strong.
- Teens are also less likely to have sex before age 18 if their parents attend religious services frequently.
- Teens whose parents are affiliated with certain religious denominations are less likely to have sex before age 18 than teens whose parents have no affiliation with a denomination.
- Teens who frequently participate in religious activities with their families—going to religious services, praying, or reading the scriptures—are also less likely to have sex before age 18.
- Teens whose peers attend religious services regularly are less likely to have sex before age 18 than those teens whose peers do not. Higher religious attendance

among peers is also associated with greater contraceptive use at first sex among girls.

- Teens whose parents have strong religious beliefs *and* who enjoy a strong mother-teen relationship are more likely to delay sex than those teens who have parents with strong religious beliefs but lack a strong mother/child relationship.
- The connection between religiosity and contraceptive use is not as clear.

## Introduction

Researchers have found that religious affiliation, religious attendance, religious beliefs, and prayer are associated with teen sexual attitudes and behavior. (Wallace & Williams, 1997; Whitehead, Wilcox, & Rostosky, 2001) Holding strong religious beliefs and praying are linked to reduced sexual activity among adolescents (Meier, 2003; Resnick et al., 1997) and teens (girls in particular) from more conservative religious denomina-

tions (including conservative Protestants and Fundamentalists) tend to begin having sexual intercourse at later ages than do teens of other religious denominations. (Bearman & Brückner, 1999; Rostosky, 2004) Some research suggests that adolescents who report any religious affiliation are less likely to have sexual intercourse than teens who are not affiliated with a religious group. (Casper, 1990; Thornton & Camburn, 1989; Whitehead et al., 2001) Other research notes that religious attendance may be a more important antecedent of sexual behavior than religious affiliation. (Studer & Thornton, 1987; Thornton & Camburn, 1989) In particular, frequent attendance at religious services is associated with delayed sexual initiation, especially among females. (Rostosky, 2004)

The link between religiosity (a broad concept that includes denominations, beliefs, behavior, and attitudes) and adolescent contraceptive use is less clear. The little research that has been done on this topic has shown mixed results. Some research

1 For the purposes of this paper, the term "sex" refers to heterosexual vaginal intercourse.

shows no association (Bearman & Brückner, 2001) between religiosity and contraceptive use, while other studies have noted that sexually experienced teens with higher levels of religiosity or more conservative religious affiliations are less likely to use contraception. (Brewster, Cooksey, Guilkey, & Rindfuss, 1998; Cooksey, Rindfuss, & Gulkey, 1996; Studer & Thornton, 1987)

The religiosity of family and peers may also affect teens' sexual behavior. For example:

- Teenagers' religious attendance and denomination are often shaped by parental religiosity. (Whitehead et al., 2001)

- Teens who regularly attend the same place of worship as their peers are less likely to have sex than teens whose peers do not attend the same place of worship. (Mott, Fondell, Hu, Kowaleski-Jones, & Menaghan, 1996)
- Higher levels of maternal religiosity are associated with reduced adolescent sexual behavior, over and above adolescent religiosity. (Whitebeck, Yoder, Hoyt, & Conger, 1999)

This *Science Says* brief builds on this earlier research by using recent longitudinal data (see Sample section for details) to examine the association between adolescent sexual behavior and parent, family, and

peer religiosity. Because positive parent-teen relationships are associated with delayed teen sexual activity and better contraceptive use, this brief also examines the role of parental religiosity in families with such relationships.

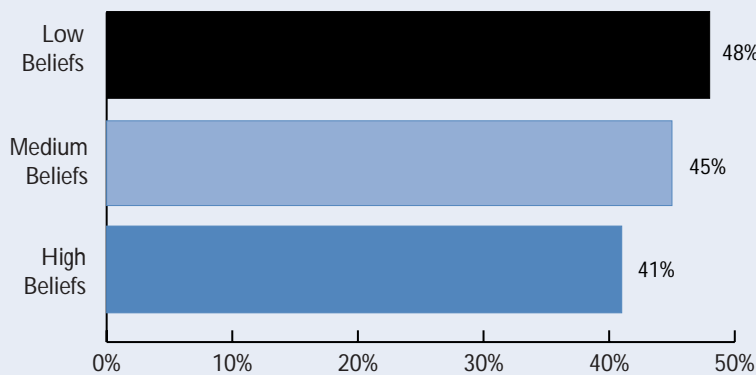
## Methods

The results presented in this brief are based on predicted probabilities that sexually inexperienced teens aged 12-14 in 1997 would 1) have sexual intercourse before age 18, and 2) use contraception at first sex.<sup>2</sup> Predicted probabilities are incorporated to assess sexual experience and contraceptive use by varying levels of parent, teen, and peer religiosity. For all estimates, we control for age, gender, race and ethnicity, mother's educational attainment (less than or equal to high school versus greater than high school), and family structure (two biological or adoptive parents versus other family structures). All estimates are weighted and based on the total sample and by gender.

## Parental Religious Beliefs

Adolescent children of parents with strong religious beliefs are less likely to have sex before age 18 than their peers whose parents have weaker religious beliefs, even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics.<sup>3</sup>

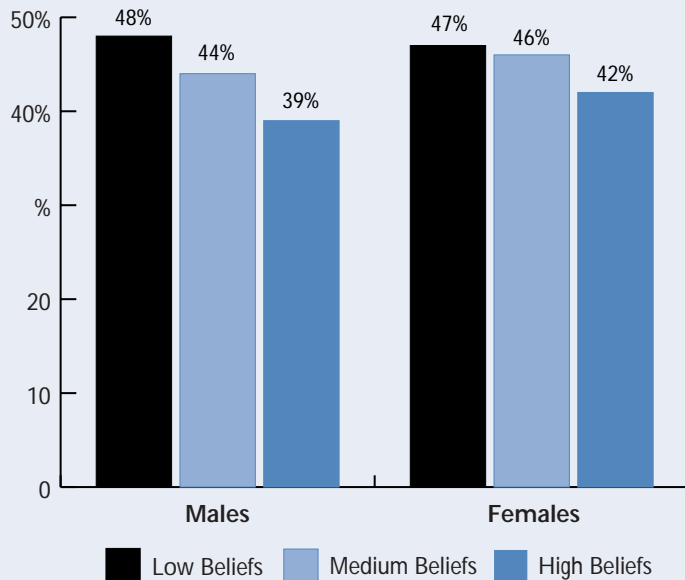
**FIGURE 1: Parental Religious Beliefs and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

- For models predicting sexual experience before age 18, predicted probabilities are derived from proportional hazard models; for models predicting contraceptive use at first sex, estimated probabilities are based on logistic regression analyses.
- The parental religious beliefs measure is a three-item index based on the following questions: "The (Bible/Koran/Torah/religious teachings) should be obeyed exactly as written in every situation"; "I don't need religion to have good values"; and "God has nothing to do with what happens to me personally." Parents receive one point each if they answered "true" to the first item and "false" to the second and third items. The index is divided into three categories: "low beliefs" (0 - 1 on the index), "medium beliefs" (2 on the index), and "high beliefs" (3 on the index).

**FIGURE 2: Parental Religious Beliefs and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, By Gender**

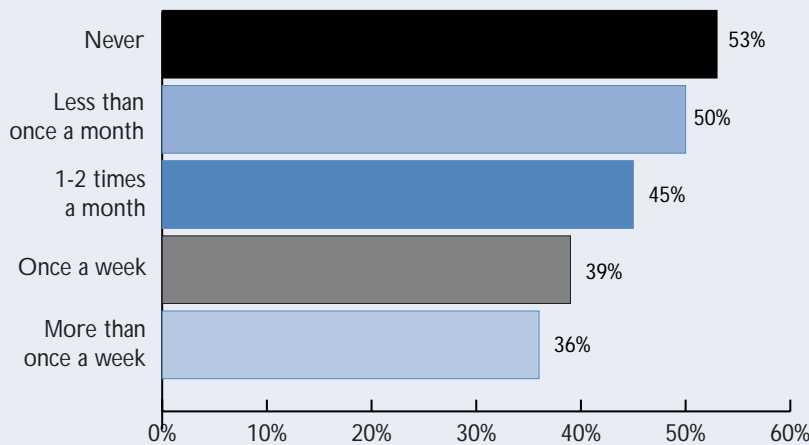


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

"medium" and "low" belief levels, respectively (see Figure 1).

- Nearly 40 percent of teen boys whose parents have high religious beliefs have sex before age 18, compared with 44 percent and 48 percent of teen boys whose parents report medium and low belief levels, respectively (see Figure 2).
- Teen girls whose parents have high religious beliefs are also less likely to have sex before age 18 (42 percent), compared with teens whose parents have low or medium religious beliefs (47 percent and 46 percent, respectively). (See Figure 2)
- Adolescents whose parents have medium levels of religious belief are the least likely to use contraception the first time they have sex (76 percent).

**FIGURE 3: Frequency of Parental Religious Attendance and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

### Parental Religious Attendance

The more frequently parents attend religious services, the less likely their adolescent children are to have sex before age 18.

- Teens whose parents never attend worship services are more likely to have sexual intercourse before age 18 (53 percent) than are teens whose parents attend services 1-2 times a month (45 percent) once a week (39 percent) or more than once a week (36 percent) (see Figures 3 and 4).

- An estimated 41 percent of teens whose parents have "high" religious beliefs have sexual inter-

course before age 18, compared with 45 percent and 48 percent of teens whose parents report

Unlike early sexual experience, the likelihood that teens will use contraception the first time they have sex does not follow a clear pattern of association with parental reli-

gious attendance. For example, the use of contraception at first sex among teen girls is least common among those with the highest *and* lowest parental religious attendance levels.

- Teen females whose parents never attend worship services or attend services more than once a week are the least likely to use contraception the first time they have sex (74 percent and 72 percent, respectively), compared with 85 percent of teens whose parents attend services one to two times a month.
- For teen males, contraceptive use at first sex is not associated with how frequently their parents attend religious services.

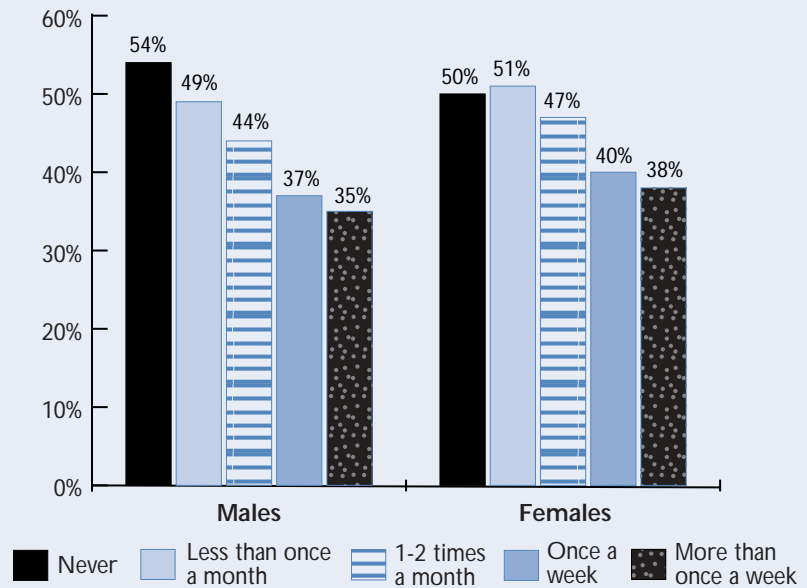
### Family Religious Activities

Teens who frequently participate in religious activities with their families (going to church, praying, or reading the scriptures together) are less likely to have sex before age 18.

- Teens who share in religious activities with their family at least six times a week are less likely to have sex before age 18 (34 percent), than teens who share religious activities with their family two to five days a week (44 percent), once a week (43 percent), or never in a typical week (50 percent) (see Figure 5). This pattern is similar for teen males and females.

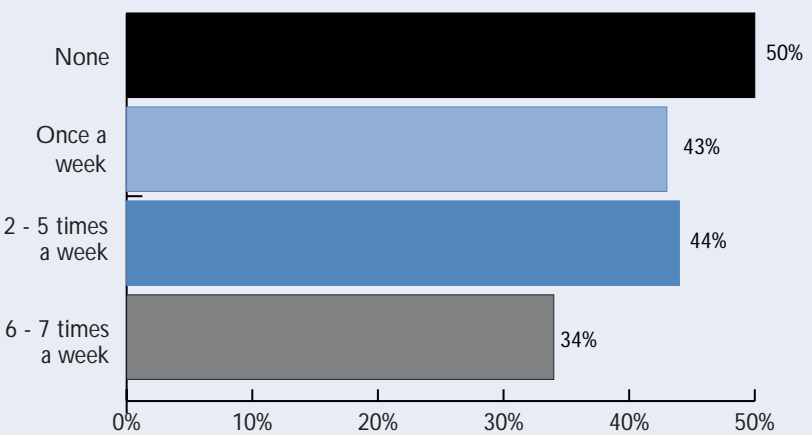
Shared religious activities do not promote better contraceptive use among teens who are sexually experienced. In fact, more frequent participation in family religious activities is associated with reduced contraceptive use for teens.

**FIGURE 4: Frequency of Parental Religious Attendance and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, By Gender**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

**FIGURE 5: Frequency of Family Religious Activity and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

- Just over 70 percent of adolescents who participate in family religious activities two or more times a week use contraception the first time they have sex. Those who never share in religious activities with family members or only do so once a week have an estimated 79-81 percent likelihood of using contraception the first time they have sex (see Figure 6). This pattern is consistent for males, but not for females.

## Parental Religious Denomination

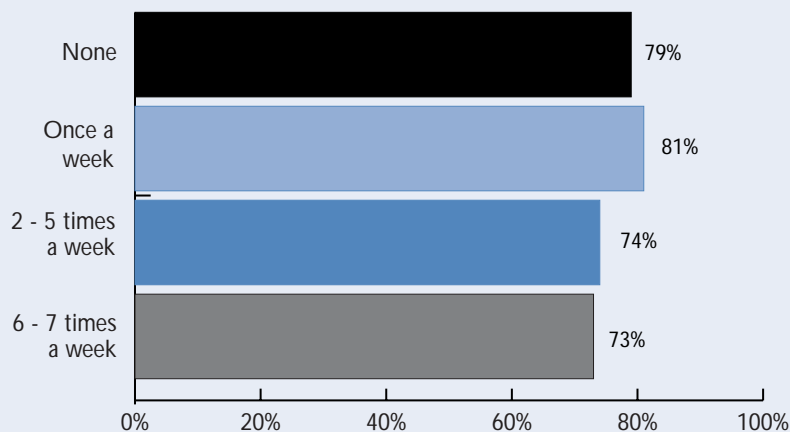
Teens whose parents are affiliated with a religious denomination are

less likely to have sex before age 18 than those whose parents do not identify with a religion. Teen contraceptive use at first sex, however,

does not vary by presence or absence of parental religious affiliation.<sup>4</sup>

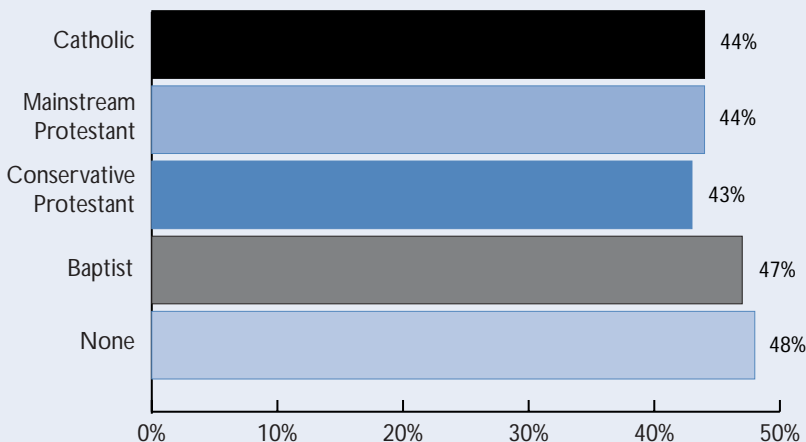
- Teens whose parents are Catholic (44 percent), Mainstream Protestant (44 percent), and Conservative Protestant (43 percent) are less likely than those with no religious affiliation (48 percent) to have sex before age 18 (see Figure 7). Children in families affiliated with the Baptist church are similarly likely to have sex before age 18 (47 percent) when compared to those with no religious affiliation (48 percent).

**FIGURE 6: Frequency of Family Religious Activity and Contraceptive Use At First Sex, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

**FIGURE 7: Parental Religious Denomination and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

## Parental Religiosity Scale

Adolescents whose parents score highest on a 0 to 5 scale of religiosity (based on beliefs, prayer, and attendance at religious services) are the least likely to have sex before age 18. However, contraceptive use at first sex does not differ by this same parental religiosity scale.<sup>5</sup>

- About half (49 percent) of children of parents with a low score on the religiosity scale have sex before age 18; for children of parents with medium scores on the religiosity scale the percentage is 44; for children of parents with high scores, it is 38. (see Figure 8).
- Teen males whose parents score low on the religiosity scale are more likely (50 percent) to have sex before age 18 than those

4 Note that the numerous religious affiliations were condensed into six categories: 1) Catholic, 2) Baptist, 3) Mainstream Protestant (Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopal/Anglican, Disciples of Christ, Reform, Nondenominational Christian, Other Protestant), 4) Conservative Protestant (United Church of Christ, Holiness, Pentecostal), 5) Other affiliation (Jewish, Mormon, Eastern Orthodox, Unitarian, Muslim, Hindu/Buddhist, Native American Tribal Religion, Other, Wicca/Witchcraft/Magic/Pagan, Other Eastern), and 6) No affiliation. Other religious denominations are not presented because of small sample sizes that may produce unstable results.

5 The authors of this brief used a five-point parent religiosity scale created by Child Trends (Moore, McGroder, Hair, & Gunnoe, 1999). The

males whose parents hold medium (42 percent) or high (38 percent) scores.

- About 38 percent of teen females whose parents score high on the religiosity scale have sex before age 18 compared with those whose parents have medium (47 percent) and low (49 percent) scores.

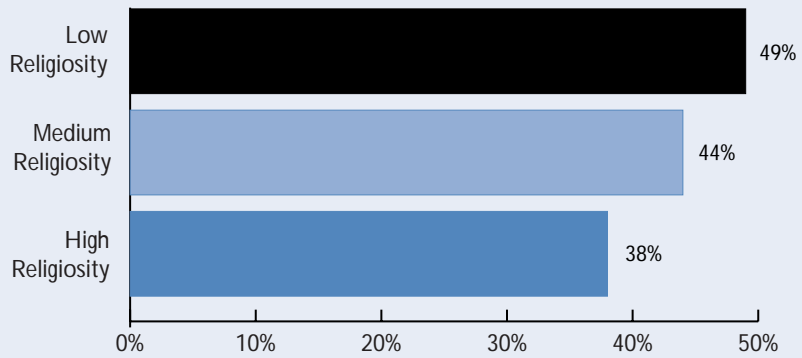
### Peer Religious Attendance

Teens who report their peers attend religious services regularly are less likely to have sex before age 18 than those teens whose peers do not.

- About 48 percent of adolescents have sex before age 18 when only 25 percent or less of their peers regularly attend religious services. The likelihood of having sex before age 18 decreases as the proportion of teens' peers who regularly attend services increases. (see Figure 9).
- This pattern holds true for teen males but not for teen females. Teen females with the highest percentage of peers who are regular churchgoers are only slightly less likely to have sex before age 18 than those with the lowest percentage of churchgoing peers.

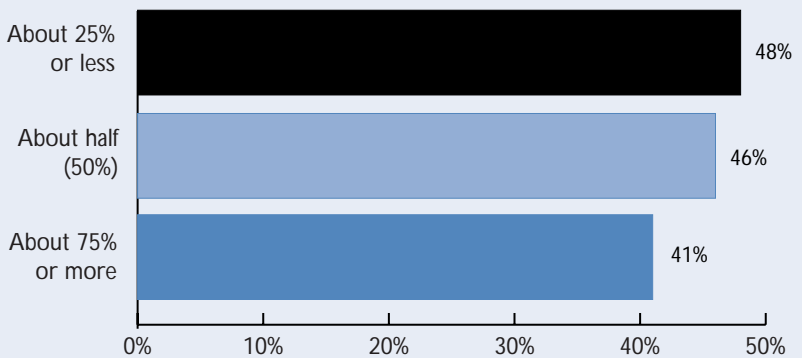
Sexually experienced teens who have a greater number of peers who attend services regularly are more likely to use contraception the first time they have sex.

**FIGURE 8: Parent Religiosity and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

**FIGURE 9: Percentage of Peers Who Attend Church or Religious Services Regularly and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**

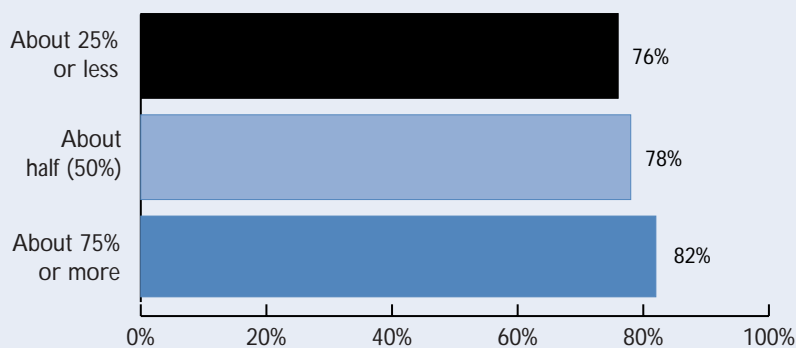


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

- Teens who report that 25 percent or fewer of their peers regularly attend religious services are less likely to use contraception the first time they have sex (76 percent) than those who report 75 percent or more of their peers attend services regularly (82 percent) (see Figure 10).

responding parent could receive one point for each of the three parental religious belief items described earlier, as well as one point if they attended a worship service at least once a month during the past year, and one point if they pray more than once a day. This scale is divided into three categories measuring "low religiosity" (0, 1, or 2 on the scale), "medium religiosity" (3 or 4 on the scale), and "high religiosity" (5 on the scale).

**FIGURE 10: Percentage of Peers Who Attend Church or Religious Services Regularly and Contraceptive Use At First Sex, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

- This pattern is true for teen females, but not for teen males. When three-quarters or more of their peers regularly attend services, about 88 percent of teen females use contraception the first time they have sex. The estimated percentages are lower when a smaller proportion of peers regularly attend religious services—75 percent if only one-quarter or less of the peers attend regularly, and 79 percent if about one-half of their peers attend regularly (see Figure 11). There are no significant differences in contraceptive use at first sex by peer church attendance among adolescent males.

### Religiosity and Positive Parent-Teen Relationships

Adolescent children of parents who have high levels of religiosity *and* who have a positive relationship with their teens are least likely to have sex before age 18.<sup>6</sup>

- Teens whose parents score low on both the religiosity and parent-teen relationship scales are more likely to have sex before age 18 than are teens whose parents score high on both measures (51 percent versus 37 percent, respectively) (see Figure 12). Teens whose parents have mixed ratings (low religiosity/high parent-teen

relationship or high parent religiosity/low parent-teen relationship) have an estimated likelihood of early sex that lies in the middle (45 percent and 44 percent, respectively).

- Adolescent children of parents who score low on the religiosity scale but high on the mother-teen relationship scale have a somewhat higher likelihood of using contraception at first sex (82 percent) than those whose parents score low on religiosity and low on mother-teen relationship (77 percent) and a somewhat higher likelihood than those whose parents score high on religiosity and high on mother-teen relationship (77 percent) (see Figure 13).

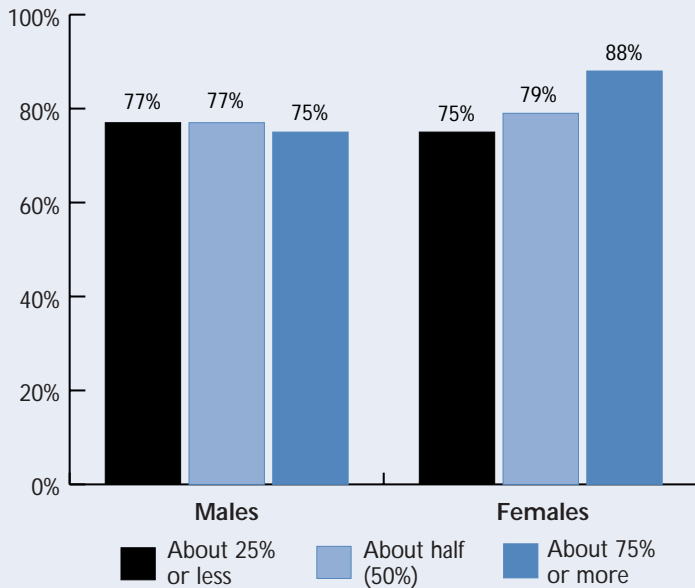
### What It All Means

Parent and family religiosity are associated with adolescent sexual behavior in a variety of ways, even after controlling for family background and socio-demographic characteristics.

- **Teens in religious families have sex at later ages.** Strong parental religious beliefs, frequent attendance at religious services, shared family religious activities, and overall religiosity are all associated with male and female teens

<sup>6</sup> The authors created a combination variable from the parent religiosity scale and a 0 to 32 scale of the residential mother's relationship with her teen. The parent-teen relationship scale was created from eight items that assess the youth's perception of his or her relationship with the youth's residential mother (e.g., thinking highly of her, wanting to be like her, enjoying spending time with her, having her praise the teen for doing well). Parents who scored a 3 or lower on the religiosity scale described above were considered "low" on religiosity, while parents who scored higher than 3 on the religiosity scale were considered "high" on religiosity. Mothers who had a parent-teen relationship score of 26 or lower (out of 32) were considered to have a "low" parent-teen relationship, and a score of higher than 26 was considered a marker of a "high" parent-teen relationship (Hair, 2005). The authors combined these two categories to create a four-level combination measure of parent religiosity and parent-teen relationship with the following categories: low religiosity/low parent-teen relationship; low religiosity/high parent-teen relationship; high parent religiosity/low parent-teen relationship; and high parent religiosity/high parent-teen relationship.

**FIGURE 11: Percentage of Peers Who Attend Church or Religious Services Regularly and Contraceptive Use At First Sex, By Gender**

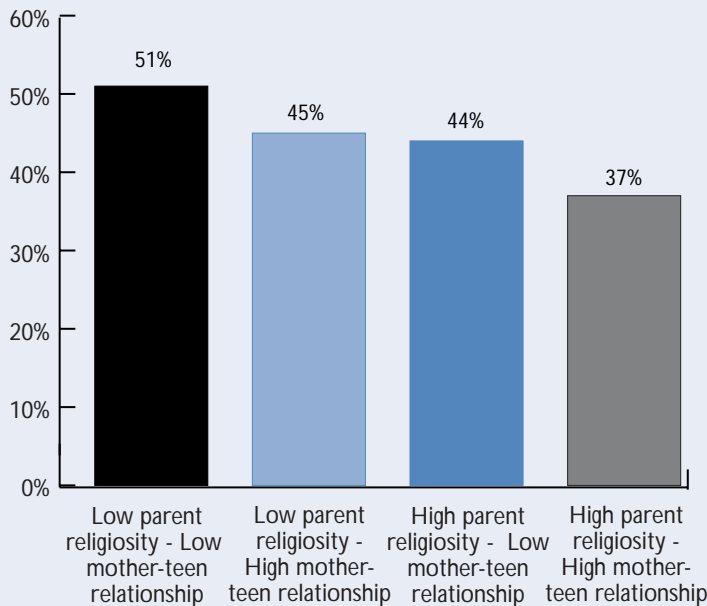


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

not having sex before age 18. These findings contradict some previous research that has shown minimal associations between religiosity (especially religious attendance) and sexual initiation among teen males. (Rostosky, 2004)

- **Some religious denominations seem more closely linked to delayed sexual initiation.** Teens whose parents are Catholic, Mainstream Protestant, or Conservative Protestant are slightly less likely to have sex at an early age than are teens whose parents have no religious affiliation. Note, however, that other researchers have found a reduced association between religious affiliation and adolescent sexual behavior after controlling for religious attendance. (Studer & Thornton, 1987; Thornton & Camburn, 1989)

**FIGURE 12: The Combination of Parent Religiosity and Mother-Youth Relationship and Sexual Experience Before Age 18, Among All Teens**

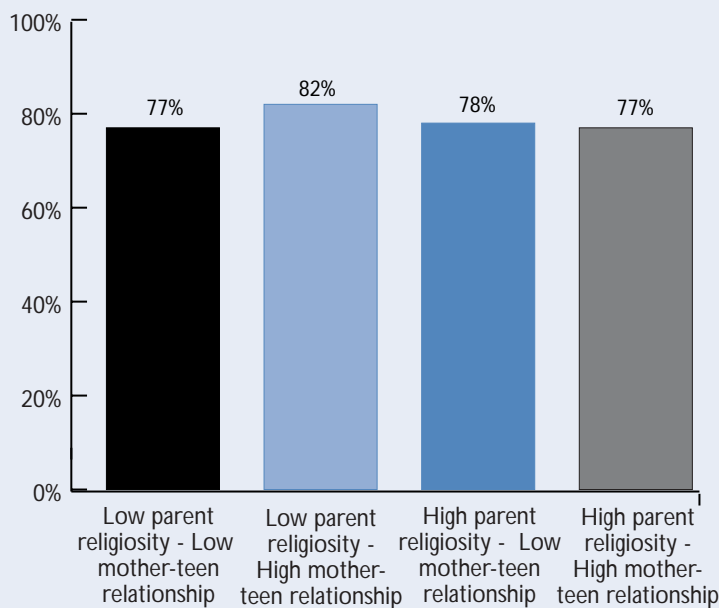


Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

- **Parent-teen relationships matter.** Teens whose parents are highly religious have sex at later ages, but the benefits are even greater in families in which mothers and teens also have a strong overall relationship. Put another way, high parental religiosity and a strong mother-teen relationship delays sex among teens more than high parental religiosity teamed with a poor mother-teen relationship. This finding supports other research that has shown delayed sexual initiation and improved contraceptive use among teens from families with more positive parent-teen relationships. (Miller, 1998)

- **Peers may also play a role.** When a large percentage of a

**FIGURE 13: The Combination of Parent Religiosity and Mother-Youth Relationship and Contraceptive Use At First Sex, Among All Teens**



Source: Child Trends analyses of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, 1997 - 2002. Analyses control for gender, race/ethnicity, mother's education, and family structure.

teens' peer groups regularly attend religious services, they are less likely to have sex before age 18 than if only a small percentage of their friends go to church regularly. This finding builds on other research showing that peers can have strong positive effects on teen sexual behavior. (Bearman & Brückner, 1999) Peer influence may also help explain why parental religiosity is associated with adolescent sexual behavior:

In particular, children in families with higher levels of religious belief and attendance may have closer ties to other religious teens.

- **The connection between religiosity and contraceptive use is not as clear.** Parents' religiosity more directly affects whether teens have sex before age 18 than their likelihood of using contraception the first time they have

sex. Although higher religious attendance among peers is associated with greater contraceptive use, at least among teen females, higher family religious activities is associated with *reduced* contraceptive use at least among boys. This finding suggests that boys in more religious families are less likely to have sex, but if they do become sexually active, they may be less prepared to use contraception.

- **Future research should focus on gaining a better understanding of *why* parent religiosity affects teens' decisions about sex.**

Upcoming analyses by the authors of this brief will examine whether parenting style, parental monitoring and awareness, and peer group characteristics can help explain the effects of parental religiosity on adolescent sexual and contraceptive behavior. For example, more religious families may more carefully monitor their teens' behaviors and children in more religious families may interact with more religious peers, both of which may help explain their lower levels of sexual experience. In addition, teens in more religious families may have more disapproving attitudes towards early sex than other teens.

## Author Information

The new research presented in this *Science Says* brief was developed by Child Trends. The authors of this research brief are Elizabeth Terry-Humen, M. P. P, Jennifer Manlove, Ph.D., Erum Ikramullah, and Suzanne Ryan, Ph.D., all of Child Trends.

## Source Information

The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997 (NLSY97), sponsored and directed by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, is a nationally representative data set of 8,984 adolescents in the United States born between 1980 and 1984 (ages 12-16 in 1997). (Hering & McClain, 2003) Although this survey was designed to document the transition from school to work of adolescents in the United States, information on a broad range of topics and family background measures is also collected in this survey. Youth were initially surveyed in 1997, and data are currently available for an additional five waves in 1998, 1999, 2000, 2001, and 2002.

## Our Sample

This *Science Says* brief draws on interviews and self-administered questionnaires in the NLSY97 to examine teen sexual experience and contraceptive use. The sample consists of adolescents who were aged 12 to 14 on December 31, 1996, and who had not yet had sex in the first round of the NLSY97 survey. The analyses follow teens through Round 6 (2002) of the survey to determine if they had sex before age 18 and if they used any form of birth control the first time they had sex. All measures of parent, family, and peer religiosity are based on the Round 1 (1997) parent and youth surveys.

## About Child Trends

Child Trends is nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization dedicated to improving the lives of children by conducting research and providing science-based infor-

mation to improve the decisions, programs, and policies that affect children. Child Trends conducted all analyses used in this fact sheet.

## About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization supported largely by private donations. The Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy.

## 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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