

## Says:

## It's A Guy Thing: Boys, Young Men, and Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Researchers, practitioners, parents, and others working with youth have become increasingly aware of the importance of involving boys and young men in teen pregnancy prevention efforts. Rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing have declined by about one-third in recent years due, in part, to dramatic changes in the sexual behavior of teen boys.<sup>1</sup> However, our understanding of teen boys' sexual attitudes and behavior still lags behind that of girls. In order to sustain the momentum in lowering teen pregnancy and birth rates, we must increase efforts to understand what drives boys to change their sexual behavior and then put into place responsive and effective programs and other initiatives.

This *Science Says* issue brief draws largely from the National Campaign publication, *It's a Guy Thing: Boys, Young Men, and Teen Pregnancy Prevention*.<sup>2</sup> The three chapter publication provides data on teen boys' sexual activity, contraceptive use, and involvement in pregnancy and parenthood. It also provides a summary of what is known about the effectiveness of prevention programs for boys, and concludes with advice from those who work directly with boys and young men.

### The Facts\*

Since the late 1980s, there have been some important changes in teen boys' sexual behavior, particularly the proportion who have had sex. The information in this section draws largely from the first chapter of *It's a Guy Thing*, authored by William Marsiglio, Ph.D.

#### Sexual Experience

- Forty seven percent of all high school students have had sexual intercourse—a 13% decrease among students since 1991 (down from 54%).<sup>3</sup> High school boys (48%) are slightly more likely than high school girls (45%) to report being sexually experienced. (YRBS data, Figure 1).
- Similarly, in 2002, 46% of all teen boys (not just those in high school) reported having had sex—a 24% decrease from 1988. By comparison, there was an 11% decrease in the proportion of sexually experienced teen girls between 1988 and 2002 (NSFG data).<sup>4</sup>
- Rates of sexual experience among boys vary by race/ethnicity. Overall, 74% of non-Hispanic black, 57% of Hispanic, and 41% of non-Hispanic white high school boys are sexually experienced. With the exception of non-Hispanic white students, high school boys are more likely to have had sex than girls (YRBS data).<sup>5</sup>
- Not surprisingly, sexual experience increases with age. While 37% of 9th grade boys report being sexually experienced, fully 61% of 12th grade boys do. The greatest differential in sexual experience by gender is in 9th grade (28% of girls vs. 37% of boys). However, by 12th grade, the proportion of sexually experienced boys and girls is about the same (61% and 62% respectively, YRBS data).<sup>6</sup>
- The proportion of very young teen boys who have had sexual intercourse varies dramatically by race/ethnicity. Ten percent of all high school boys report that they had sex before age 13. This

\* Please note that the data presented in this section are from two main sources: The National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a nationally representative household survey conducted in 2002 with men and women aged 15-44, and the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a nationally representative school based survey conducted in 2003 with high school students. The NSFG provides data about all teens in the population and the YRBS provides data only on teens in high school.

includes 32% of non-Hispanic black students, 12% of Hispanic students, and five percent of non-Hispanic white male students (YRBS data).<sup>7</sup>

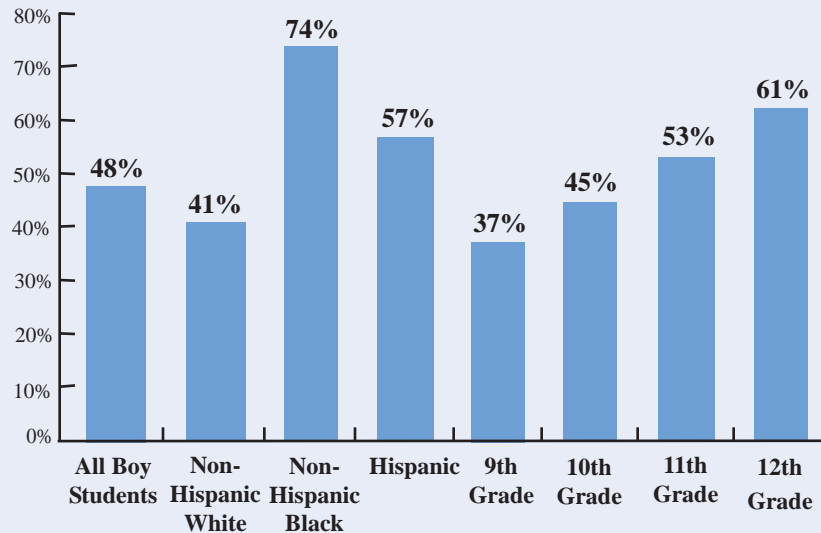
## Frequency and Partners

Boys who have sex do so with varying frequency. Among all sexually experienced boys aged 15-19 in 2002, nearly half (45%) did not have sex in the four weeks prior to being interviewed. Another 15% had sex one time, and 15% had sex two to three times during this time period. Some teen boys reported having sex more frequently; 14% had sex four to seven times and 13% reported having had sex eight or more times in the four weeks prior to being interviewed (NSFG data).<sup>8</sup>

The proportion of male students who report having four or more sexual partners has decreased from 23% in 1991 to 18% in 2003 (YRBS data).<sup>9</sup>

Overall, high school boys are more likely than high school girls to have had four or more sexual partners (18% vs. 11% respectively), though the gap differs dramatically by race/ethnicity and grade level.

**FIGURE 1: Proportion of high school boys who have had sex, by race/ethnicity and grade, YRBS 2003**



Teen boys' number of sexual partners varies by race/ethnicity. Overall, 42% of non-Hispanic black, 21% of Hispanic, and 12% of non-Hispanic white high school boys report having four or more sexual partners (YRBS data).<sup>10</sup>

As one might expect, the number of reported sexual partners among teen boys increases with age. For instance, 14% of 9th grade boys report having four or more sexual partners compared to 22% of 12th grade boys. Interestingly, in 9th

grade the percentage of high school boys who have had four or more sexual partners is more than double the percentage of girls who have had this number of partners. This gap decreases with age (YRBS data).<sup>11</sup>

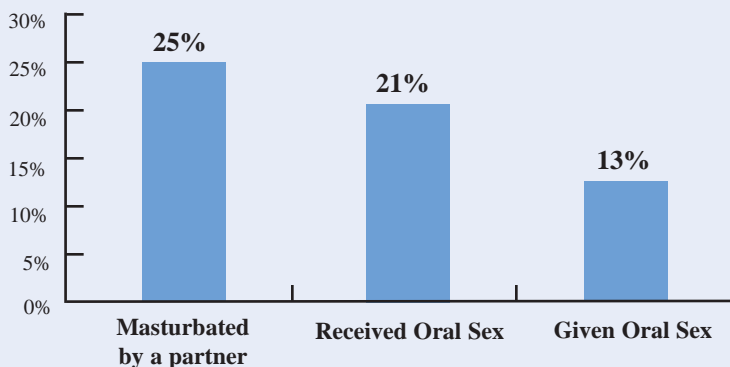
## Other Sexual Activity

Just over half of all boys aged 15-19 (55%) say they have either received or given oral sex to a girl (NSFG data, Figure 2).<sup>12</sup>

Nearly a quarter (24%) of all virgin boys aged 15-19 have had oral sex. Younger virgin boys (21% of those aged 15-17) are much less likely to have done so than older virgin boys (31% of those aged 18-19, NSFG data).<sup>13</sup>

One quarter of all boys aged 15-19 who have not had sexual intercourse have been masturbated by a female partner (NSFG data).<sup>14</sup>

**FIGURE 2: Percentage of virgin teen boys and other types of sexual intimacy, NSFG 2002**



## Condom Use

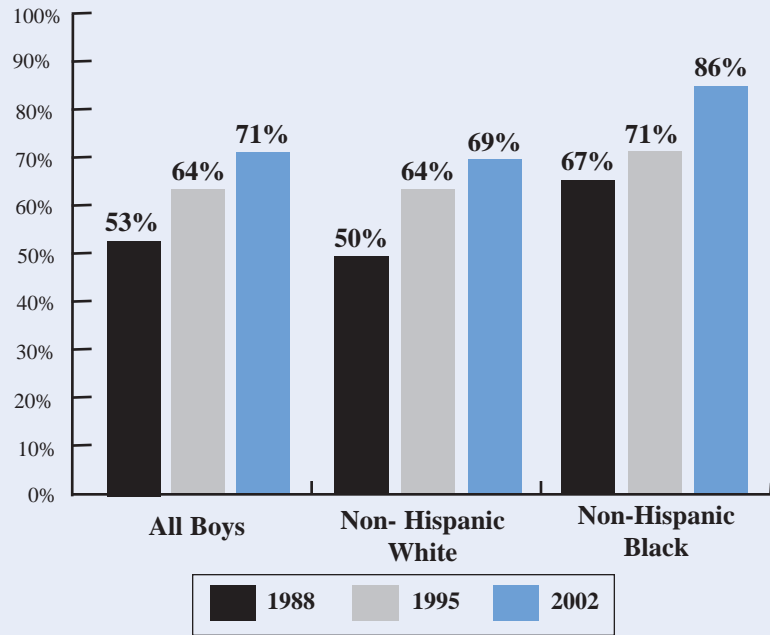
Among teen boys, condoms are the most commonly used method of contraception.

- **Use at first sex:** About seven in ten (71%) sexually experienced teen boys used a condom the first time they had sex. The proportion of sexually experienced teen boys who used a condom the first time they had sex varies by race/ethnicity. More than eight in 10 non-Hispanic black teen boys used a condom at first sex (85%) compared to 68% of non-Hispanic white and 67% of Hispanic teen boys (NSFG data).<sup>15</sup>

- **Use at last sex:** More than two thirds of sexually experienced teen boys report that they used a condom the last time they had sex (71%)—an increase of 33% between 1988 and 2002 (Figure 3). The proportion of sexually experienced teen boys who report using dual methods with a partner—a condom and a hormonal method—increased as well, from 15% in 1988 to 24% in 2002 (NSFG data).<sup>16</sup>

- **Consistent Use:** Almost half (48%) of all sexually experienced never-married boys aged 15-19 report using a condom every time they had sex in the past year. Slightly less than half (44%) report using a condom some of the time during the past year, while 9% report never using a condom during sex in the past year (NSFG data).<sup>17</sup>

**FIGURE 3: Percentage of sexually active never-married boys (15-19) who used a condom at last sex, NSAM, 1988, 1995, NSFG 2002**



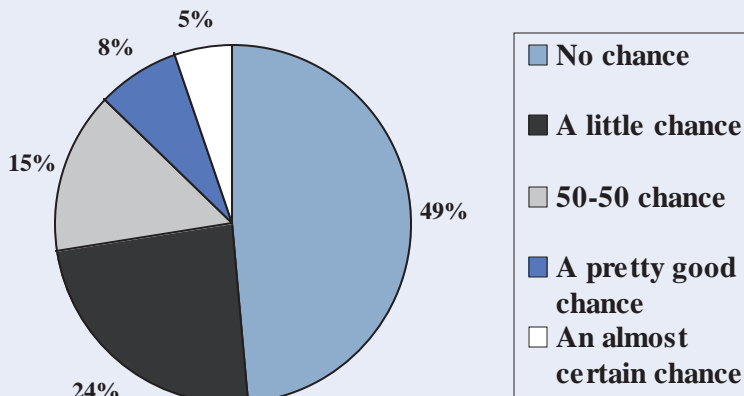
### Attitudes Towards Condoms

- Just under half of all teen boys (49%) say that there is “no chance” it would be embarrassing to discuss using a condom with a new partner. Nearly a quarter (24%) believe there is “little chance” that it would be embarrassing (NSFG data, Figure 4).<sup>18</sup>

- More than eight in 10 teen boys (83%) say that there is either a “pretty good” chance or an “almost certain” chance that a new partner would appreciate it if they used a condom during sex (NSFG data).<sup>19</sup>

- One quarter of all teen boys say that there is either a “pretty good” chance or an “almost certain” chance that they would feel less pleasure during sex if they used a condom. Fifteen percent of teen boys say there is no chance that a condom would reduce physical pleasure (NSFG data).<sup>20</sup>

**FIGURE 4: Teen boys’ (15-19) reaction to the questions: “Would it be embarrassing for you and a new partner to discuss using a condom?”, NSFG 2002**



### Pregnancy and Parenthood

- More than one in eight sexually experienced teen boys (13%) report they have gotten a partner pregnant. The proportion of sexually experienced teen boys who report that they have caused a pregnancy varies by race/ethnicity. Overall, 21% of Hispanic, 19% of non-Hispanic black, and

9% of non-Hispanic white teen boys report that they have gotten a partner pregnant (NSFG data, Figure 5).<sup>21</sup>

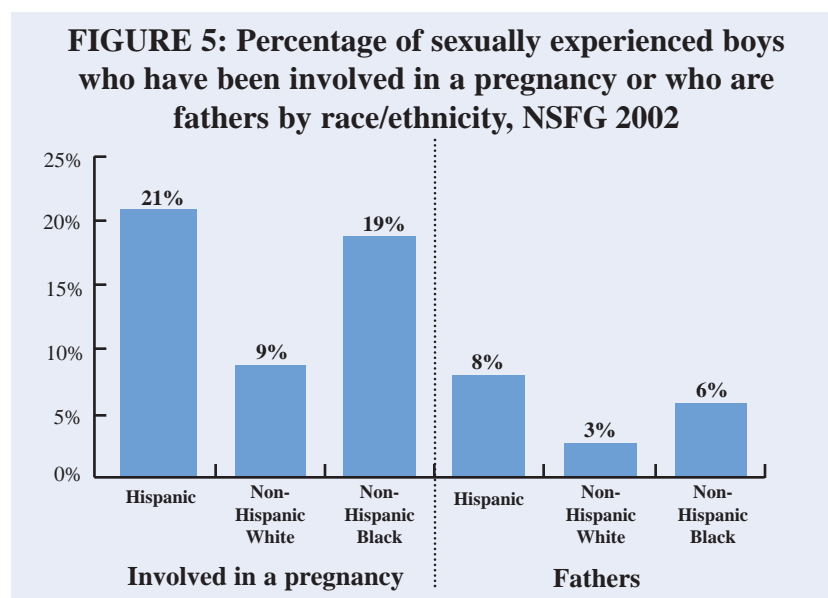
- Overall, 4% of sexually experienced teen boys report having a child. Approximately one in 14 sexually experienced Hispanic teen boys (7%), one in 16 non-Hispanic black teen boys (6%), and 2% of non-Hispanic white teen boys report having a child.<sup>22</sup>

## The Programs

To continue reducing rates of teen pregnancy and birth in the United States, it is important to step up prevention efforts that specifically target boys. However, boys-only programs are relatively new, few have been rigorously evaluated, and fewer still have been shown to be effective. Therefore, it is useful to consider other sources of information on what works with boys.

Chapter two of *It's A Guy Thing*, by Amy Vastine Reis and Freya Sonenstein, Ph.D., describes the results of a literature review of co-educational, school-based teen pregnancy and STD/HIV prevention programs in terms of their effectiveness in reducing risky sexual behavior among adolescent boys. A summary follows of the findings for the six programs with strong evidence of success for boys or for both boys and girls. (A more detailed summary of the evaluations of all the programs can be found in the full report at [www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org).)

**Service Learning Programs:** Two programs, **Reach for Health (RFH)** and **Teen Outreach Program (TOP)**, were effective with boys and girls. Teens in RFH, a program that served economically disadvantaged 7th and 8th graders in New York City, delayed first sex and were less likely to have had sex in the past several months than teens not in the pro-



gram. Participants in TOP, a program for high school students in several states, were less likely to get pregnant or cause a pregnancy than those not in the program.

### Sexuality Education Programs with Multiple Additional Components:

Four programs in this category had strong evidence of success for boys or for boys and girls.

- The Aban Aya Youth Project and Draw the Line/Respect the Line** programs incorporated components related to the values or customs of a particular culture. Aban Aya targeted African American youth and addressed violence, substance abuse, and risky sexual behavior in 12 Chicago schools. It reduced the likelihood that participants had sex recently and also increased condom use. Draw the Line served primarily Latino teens in middle schools in Northern California. It delayed first sex and the frequency of sex among boys in the program.
- The Seattle Social Development Program** and **Safer Choices** combined sex education with a school, community, or parent component. The programs showed strong evidence of success with boys and girls. The Seattle Program took place in grades one through six and promoted strong student-

school bonding. Even though it did not have a sexuality component, it decreased the incidence of first sex, increased condom use at last intercourse, and reduced the number of sexual partners for boys and girls. Safer Choices was a two year program for 9th and 10th graders. Program participants had less unprotected sex, and boys used contraception more frequently than boys in a comparison group.

Overall, the programs that are effective with boys—that delay first sex, increase contraceptive use and/or reduce pregnancy rates—have several notable characteristics. Some of them address teen sexual behavior by going beyond the classroom, such as the service learning programs. Others include a cultural component that seems to contribute to program effectiveness. Finally, those that extend across school years—at least two years—seem to be more effective than those shorter in duration.

## Tips from the Field

The third chapter of *It's a Guy Thing*, by Karen Troccoli and Molly Whitehead, is based on discussions with practitioners who work directly with boys and young men as well as

reviews of program materials and other background information. In contrast to the previous two chapters, which are based on quantitative information and rigorous evaluation literature, this chapter offers a more qualitative and descriptive look at the challenges in engaging teen boys in teen pregnancy prevention, as well as strategies for overcoming them. The chapter offers five categories of challenges and corresponding strategies for overcoming them:

### **Many programs are not inviting to teen boys and young men.**

- **Make programs/initiatives boy-friendly:** This entails more than making pink pamphlets blue. It means ensuring that programs' goals include language specifically about serving boys; creating an environment that is inviting to boys, such as waiting rooms with relevant magazines and posters; hiring male staff members; and ensuring the program offers information of specific interest to boys.

### **Most boys are not in programs.**

- **Go to where the boys are:** Programs cannot be effective unless they have clients, so creative outreach strategies are important for getting boys involved. These strategies can range, for example, from visiting community centers, sporting events, and other gathering places, to partnering with job training or fatherhood programs.

### **Parents often struggle to communicate with their sons about pregnancy and related issues.**

- **Help tongue-tied parents:** Despite research showing that close parent/child relationships help young people steer clear of risky behavior, many parents feel they have little or no influence over their children's decisions about sex and/or do not know what to say about these issues. Practitioners should help parents

understand their influence and help them use it by providing guidance on how to discuss sex, love, and relationships with their sons and daughters.

### **Boys are not all the same.**

- **Tailor approaches:** Although some messages about the importance of avoiding unintended pregnancy are universal, tailoring an intervention to boys' ages, socioeconomic status, and cultural identification can make it more effective.

### **Punitive measures after the fact may not be preventive.**

- **Emphasize prevention to reduce the need for punitive measures:** Historically, young men have been linked to teen pregnancy primarily through laws that seek to make them accountable for children they have fathered. While this is necessary for the wellbeing of the mothers and children involved, it also is important to encourage young men to be accountable as fathers for their own sake and to delay fatherhood until they are financially and emotionally prepared for it.

## **What It All Means**

The information in this *Science Says* offers some key insights regarding boys' contributions to recent declines in teen pregnancy and birth rates. Several of these crosscutting themes are summarized below, along with implications for those working with—or planning to work with—teen boys and young men.

### **Boys are delaying first sex and using contraception more often when they do have sex.**

Teen boys are contributing significantly to decreasing rates of teen pregnancy and birth in the United States. More boys are delaying first sex, and those who are having sex are using contraception more consistently. Interestingly, data suggest that, as teens age, the gender gap in the proportion of those who are sex-

ually experienced and those who have had four or more lifetime partners decreases. That the dial has moved in these areas should signal to parents, program leaders, school officials, and others who work with boys the value of including them in prevention efforts to sustain this momentum.

### **Teen pregnancy prevention programs can be effective with boys.**

Although few rigorous evaluations exist of boys-only prevention programs, the research on coed school-based programs for boys and girls offers some insight into what works with boys. Programs that reach beyond the classroom to include community service and other out-of-school activities have had consistently positive outcomes among boys. Programs with a cultural component also seem effective with boys. In the future, all evaluations of coed programs should separately examine outcomes for boys and girls to further clarify what works for each group. In addition, more males-only programs should be rigorously evaluated to increase our understanding of what is—and is not—working with them.

### **Much can be learned from those on the front lines.**

Practitioners, community leaders, and others working with boys and young men have amassed valuable insights and promising approaches that can guide others in this area. Although not all initiatives have been evaluated, anecdotal evidence can benefit those who are looking for creative ways to engage boys. Opportunities for sharing information—through conferences, teleconferences, websites, and publications—is important for encouraging more work with boys and young men.

### **There is still much to learn about the sexual attitudes and behavior of teen boys and young men.**

Although common sense suggests that boys play an important role in the decisions couples make about

sex and relationships, we still lack in-depth information about what influences those decisions. For instance, we have trend data on the percentage of high school-aged boys who have had sex, but we do not fully understand what has led to recent declines in these percentages. The good news is that growing awareness of the importance of focusing on boys has led to increased attention to collecting data, evaluation, and initiatives designed—at least in part—to help shape the sexual behavior of teen boys and young men. But more is still needed. The more we know about boys, the more we can tailor interventions to address how boys view and understand sex, love and relationships.

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## Endnotes

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## Funding Information

This research brief was supported by Grant Number U65/CCU324968-01 from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of CDC.

## About Putting What Works To Work

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.

## Author Information

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff members Katherine Suellentrop, and Karen Troccoli.

## About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, non-partisan organization supported largely by private foundations and donations. The National Campaign's mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy. The National Campaign's goal is to reduce the teen pregnancy rate by one-third between 2006 and 2015.