

Says: Parent-Child Communication About Sex and Related Topics



Research suggests that parents can play a critical role in their children's decisions about sex. In fact, teens report that their parents influence their decisions about sex more than their friends, the media, or their siblings.¹ Moreover, a majority of teens agree that it would be easier for them to postpone sexual activity and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents.²

This *Science Says* issue brief explores parent-child communication about sex and related issues using data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) 2002. The NSFG is the premier source of national information on teen sexual behavior, contraceptive use, and pregnancy. The NSFG surveys teens aged 15-19 and results are usually reported for this age group. Readers should note, however, that the results reported in this research brief reflect those teens who say they had a conversation with their parents about a particular topic *by the time they reached age 18*.

Highlights

- Over two-thirds of teens have talked with a parent at least once about a sexual topic. Surprisingly, younger teens are more likely to say that they have discussed these issues with a parent.
 - Nearly six in ten teen girls have talked with a parent about how to say no to sex, compared to less than half of all teen boys.
 - Girls are also far more likely than boys to have talked to a parent about different methods of birth control and where to get birth control.
 - Boys are slightly more likely than girls to have talked to a parent about how to use a condom.
 - Boys and girls are equally as likely to have talked with a parent about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs).
 - Hispanic teens are less likely to discuss sexual topics with their parents than their non-Hispanic black and non-Hispanic white peers.
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- Most teens—71% of girls and 69% of boys—have talked with a parent about at least one of the following topics: how to say no to sex, methods of birth control, where to get birth control, STDs, and how to use a condom (Figure 1).**
- Younger teens (aged 15-17) are more likely than older teens (aged 18-19) to report that they have talked to a parent about issues related to sex. Three quarters of younger teen girls (75%) and more than seven in 10 younger teen boys (71%) have talked to a parent about at least one of the topics noted above. By comparison, two-thirds of older teen girls and boys (66% each) have discussed sexual topics with their parents. The difference between the proportion of younger and older teen girls who have talked with a parent about sexual behavior is statistically significant.³
 - Talking with a parent about sexual behavior also varies according to race/ethnicity. Among boys the differences are statistically significant. Almost three quarters of non-Hispanic black teen girls (74%) and fully three quarters of non-Hispanic black teen boys (75%) have talked with a parent about at least one of the topics mentioned above. By contrast, less than two-thirds of Hispanic teen girls and boys report that they have talked about sexual behavior

with a parent (65% and 62% respectively), and 72% of non-Hispanic white teen girls and 71% of non-Hispanic white teen boys report they have talked to a parent about sexual behavior.

- Sexually experienced⁴ teens are slightly more likely than virgin teens to have talked to a parent about sex and related issues. Almost three-fourths of sexually experienced teen girls and boys have talked with a parent about the topics listed above (73% and 72% respectively) compared to 69% of virgin teen girls and 66% of virgin teen boys.

Saying no to sex (Figure 2):

- More than half of all teen girls say that they have talked to a parent about how to say no to sex (57%) compared to less than half of teen boys (45%).
- Younger teens (15-17) are significantly more likely than older teens (18-19) to report that they have talked to a parent about how to say no to sex. Among girls, six in 10 younger teens (62%) have talked

with a parent about how to say no to sex compared with 51% of older teens. Among boys, close to half of all younger teen have talked with a parent about how to say no to sex (49%) compared to about four in 10 older teens (41%).

- Non-Hispanic white teen boys are significantly more likely to have talked to a parent about how to say no to sex compared to Hispanic and non-Hispanic black teen boys. Almost half of non-Hispanic white teen boys (49%)

FIGURE 1: Teens (aged 15-19) who say they have ever talked with a parent about sex and related issues, 2002

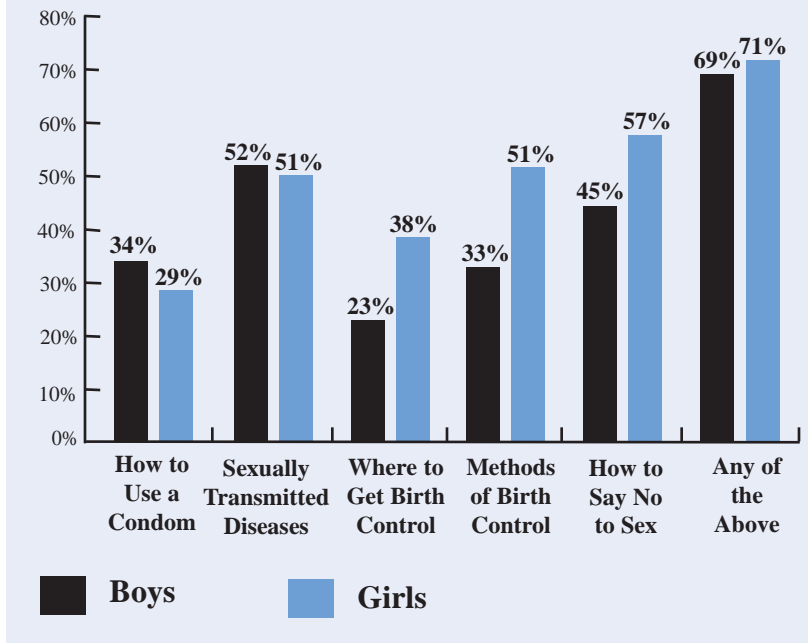
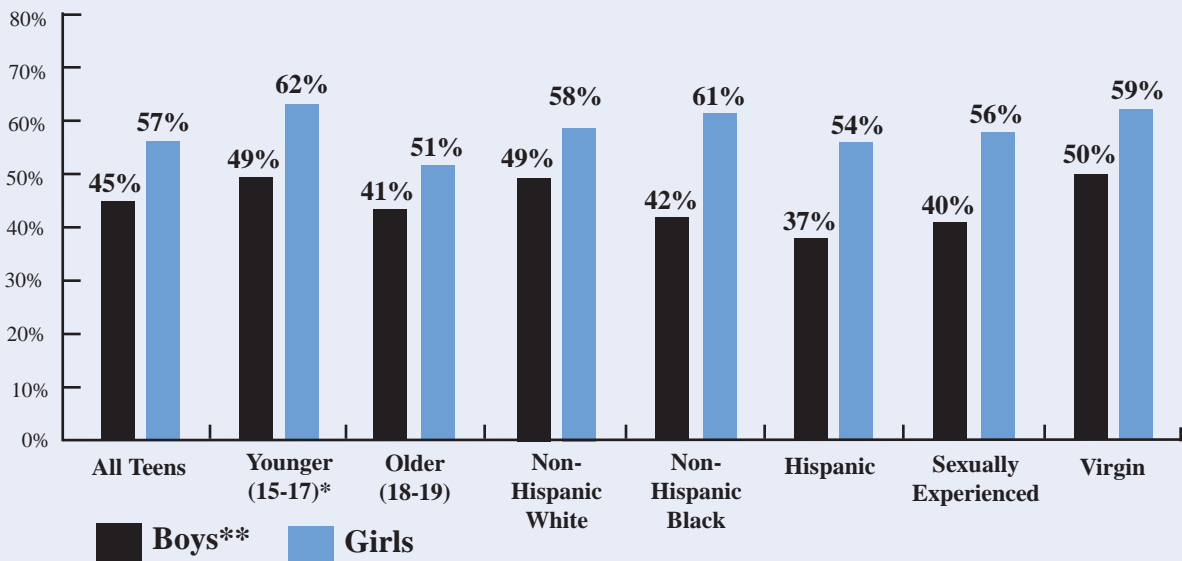


FIGURE 2: Teens who have talked with a parent about how to say no to sex by age group, race/ethnicity and sexual experience, 2002



* Difference between Younger and Older teens is statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)

** Differences between racial/ethnic groups and sexually experienced and virgin boys are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)

have discussed the issue with a parent compared to about four in 10 non-Hispanic black teen boys (42%) and Hispanic teen boys (37%).

- Although the proportion of teen girls who have discussed how to say no to sex with a parent varies by race/ethnicity, the differences are not statistically significant—58% of non-Hispanic white, 61% of non-Hispanic black and 54% of Hispanic teen girls have talked with a parent about this issue.
- Virgin teens are more likely than sexually experienced teens to have talked with a parent about how to say no to sex. For girls, 59% of virgins and 56% of sexually experienced teens have discussed this issue. For boys, half of all virgin (50%) and about four in 10 sexually experienced teen boys (40%) have discussed this issue. The difference among boys is statistically significant.

Different methods of birth control (Figure 3):

- Teen girls are much more likely than teen boys to have talked with a parent about different methods of birth control—half of all teen girls (51%) compared to a third of all teen boys (33%).
- The proportion of teen girls and boys who have talked to a parent about birth control does not differ much by age group. However, the proportion of teens who have talked to a parent about birth control methods does vary significantly by race/ethnicity for both boys and girls. Among girls, more than half of non-Hispanic white teens have talked to a parent about birth control (56%) compared to 49% of non-Hispanic black teens and 42% of Hispanic teens. Among boys, almost four in 10 non-Hispanic white teens (37%) have discussed birth control with a parent, about a third of Hispanic teens (34%) have talked about this issue, and less

than a quarter of non-Hispanic black teen boys have talked with a parent about birth control methods (24%).

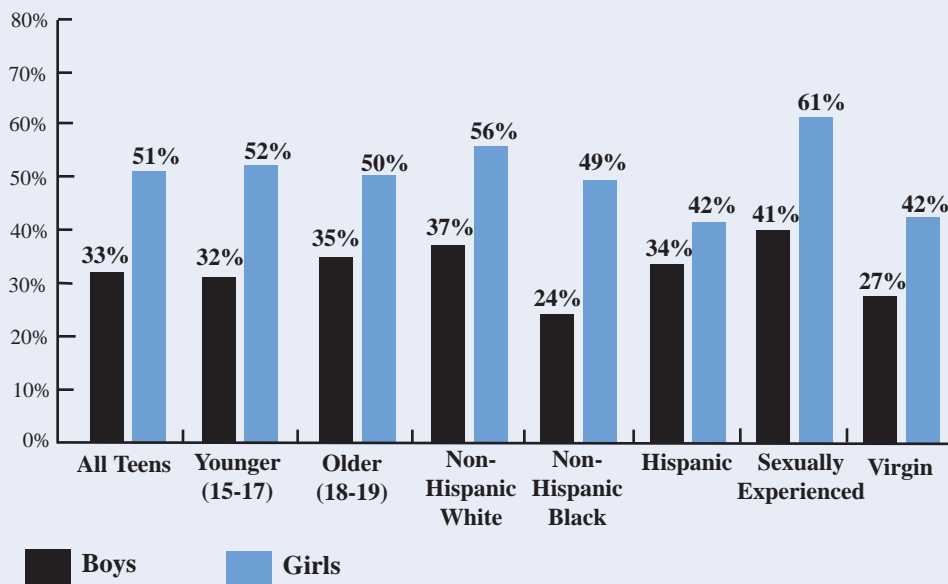
- Sexually experienced teens are significantly more likely than virgin teens to have talked with a parent about methods of birth control. More than six in 10 sexually experienced teen girls (61%) have talked to a parent about birth control compared to four in 10 virgin teen girls (42%). Among boys, 41% of sexually experienced teens compared to 27% of virgin teens have talked with a parent about birth control.

Where to get birth control (Figure 4):

- Even though about half of teen girls have discussed methods of birth control with a parent, less than four in 10 girls (38%) have discussed where to get birth control. Less than a quarter of all teen boys (23%) have talked about where to get birth control with a parent. A similar proportion of older and younger teens have talked with a parent about where to get birth control.

- The proportion of teens who say they have talked to a parent about where to get birth control varies significantly across racial/ethnic groups. Among girls, 27% of Hispanic teens, 35% of non-Hispanic black teens, and 42% of non-Hispanic white teens have talked to a parent about where to get birth control. For boys, 24% of

FIGURE 3: Teens who have talked with a parent about methods of birth control by age and race/ethnicity and sexual experience, 2002

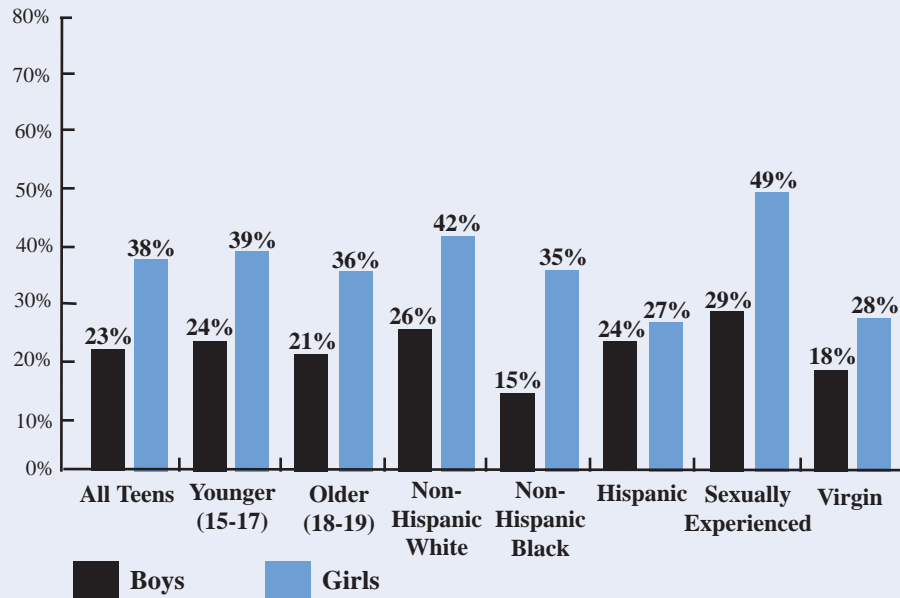


* Differences between racial/ethnic groups and sexually experienced and virgin teens are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

Hispanic, 15% of non-Hispanic black, and 26% of non-Hispanic white teens have talked to a parent about this issue.

- Sexually experienced teens are significantly more likely to report having talked to a parent about where to get birth control. Almost half of sexually experienced teen girls (49%) and more than a quarter of sexually experienced teen boys (29%) have talked with a parent about where to get birth control compared to 28% of virgin teen girls and 18% of virgin teen boys.

FIGURE 4: Teens who have talked to a parent about where to get birth control by age and race/ethnicity and sexual experience, 2002



* Differences between racial/ethnic groups and sexually experienced and virgin teens are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

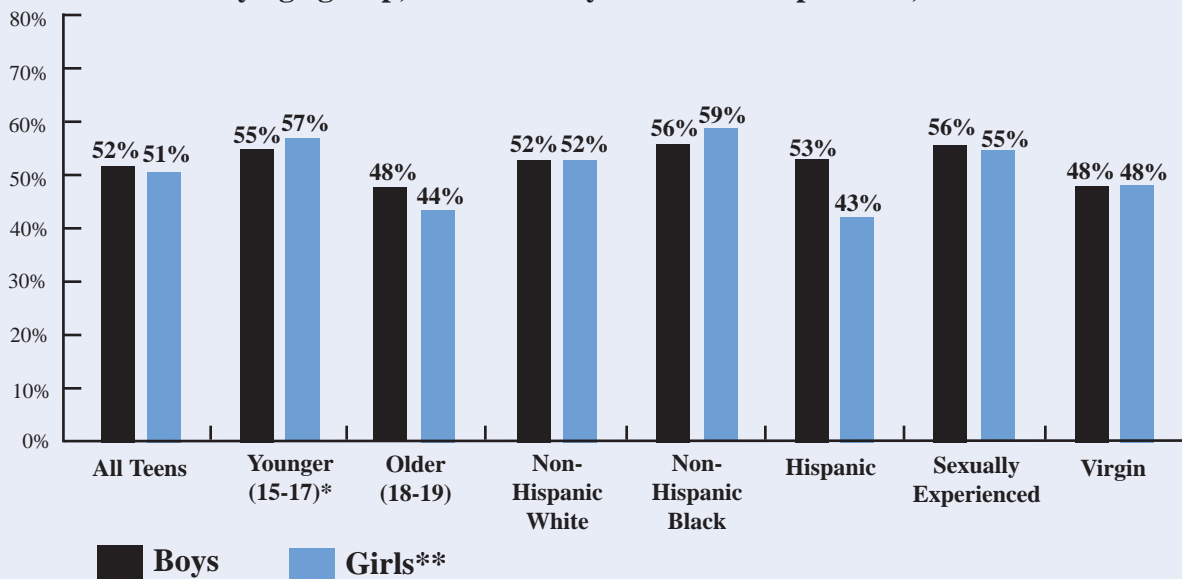
Sexually transmitted diseases (Figure 5):

- About half of all teens say they have discussed STDs with a parent—51% of girls and 52% of boys. Older teens are significantly *less*

likely than younger teens to have talked to a parent about STDs. Over half of all younger girls (57%) and boys (55%) have discussed STDs with a parent compared to 44% of older girls and 48% of older boys.

- Non-Hispanic black teens are more likely than Hispanic and non-Hispanic white teens to report that they have talked to a parent about STDs. Almost six in 10 non-Hispanic black teen girls (59%), compared to 43% of

FIGURE 5: Teens who have talked to a parent about sexually transmitted diseases by age group, race/ethnicity and sexual experience, 2002



*Differences between older and younger teens and sexually experienced and virgin teens are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

**Difference between racial and ethnic groups among girls is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$)

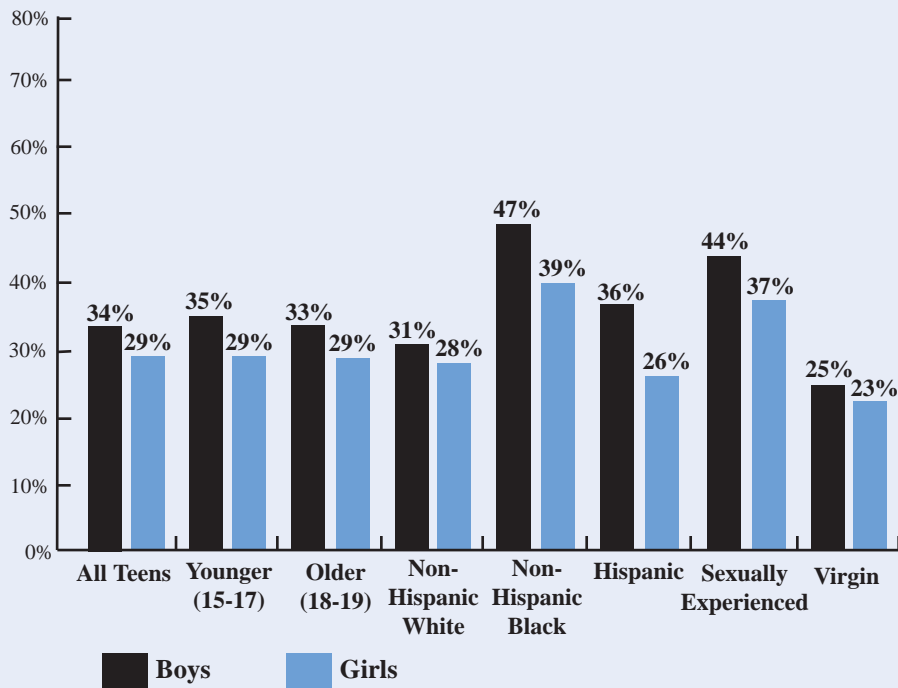
Hispanic teen girls and 52% of non-Hispanic white teen girls have discussed this issue with a parent. These differences are statistically significant. Among boys, 56% of non-Hispanic black, 53% of Hispanic, and 52% of non-Hispanic white teens have talked to a parent about STDs. The differences among boys are not statistically significant.

- Sexually experienced teens are significantly more likely to have talked to a parent about STDs compared to virgin teens. More than half of sexually experienced teens have talked to a parent about STDs—55% of girls and 56% of boys—compared to 48% of virgin girls and 48% of virgin boys.

How to use a condom (Figure 6):

- Approximately one third of teen boys (34%) and teen girls (29%) say they have talked to a parent about how to use a condom. The proportions of older and younger teens who have talked to a parent about how to use a condom are similar.
- Non-Hispanic black teens are significantly more likely than both non-Hispanic white and Hispanic teens to report having talked to a parent about how to use a condom. In fact, almost half of all non-Hispanic black teen boys (47%) have discussed how to use a condom with a parent compared to 31% of non-Hispanic white teen boys and

FIGURE 6: Teens who have talked to a parent about how to use a condom by age and race/ethnicity and sexual experience, 2002



**Differences between racial/ethnic groups and sexually experienced and virgin teens are statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)

36% of Hispanic teen boys. Almost four in 10 non-Hispanic black teen girls (39%) have talked to a parent about this issue compared to 28% of non-Hispanic white teen girls and 26% of Hispanic teen girls.

- Over one third of sexually experienced teen girls (37%) say they have talked to a parent about how to use a condom compared to 23% of virgin teen girls. Almost half of sexually experienced teen boys (44%) have talked to a parent about how to use a condom compared to a quarter of virgin teen boys (25%).

What It All Means

Most teens say that they have had some discussion with their parents about sex and related issues. However, the topics that parents discuss with teen girls differ from what

they discuss with teen boys. In general, girls are far more likely than boys to report that they talked with a parent about sex and, specifically, about birth control methods, where to get birth control, and how to refuse sex. In fact, the most common sexual topic of discussion for girls and their parents is how to say no to sex. Boys are slightly more likely to talk with a parent about how to use a condom and boys and girls are about equally likely to talk about STDs.

It is also worth noting that younger teens are far more likely than older teens to report having discussed sexual topics with their parents. This may be due to an increasing number of parents recognizing the importance of discussing sexual topics with their children beginning at an early age. Or it may be that parents and teens simply do not want to discuss these issues with each other.

It is important to note that while *conversations* about sex are helpful for teens, the overall quality of parent-child *relationships* are even more critical for helping teens make positive decisions. Close parent-child relationships—not just discussions about sex—help protect adolescents from risky sexual behavior such as early and unprotected intercourse.

Research shows that parents are a valuable and trusted source of information about sex; nine out of ten parents of teens agree that it is important that they talk to their kids about sex, and teens of all ages say they want to hear from their parents about love, sex, relationships and values. Even so, parents indicate that they often don't know what to say, how to say it, or when to start the conversation.⁵ In order to help teens make responsible decisions about sex, parents should be clear about their own sexual values and attitudes, and they should talk with their children early and often about sex and relationships. Monitoring and supervising adolescents' activities, getting to know teens' friends, and understanding the media environment of teens are additional ways that parents can help their teens make responsible decisions.

between groups (boys versus girls, older versus younger teens, etc) are true differences in attitudes/behavior, or are due to the particular teens included in the survey, which is meant to be representative of the U.S. teen population. For the purposes of these analyses, the threshold for statistical significance is 0.05. That is, results are considered significant if the "p value" (or probability of the difference being just a random occurrence) is equal to or less than 5%.

⁴ For boys, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a female, or having answered yes to the following question: "have you ever had sexual intercourse with a female (sometimes this is called making love, having sex, or going all the way)?" For girls, being "sexually experienced" is defined as having been married, having cohabited with a male, having been pregnant, or having answered yes to the following question: "at any time in your life, have you ever had sexual intercourse with a man, that is, made love, had sex, or gone all the way?" "Virgins" are those who have never married, never cohabited, never been pregnant (girls only), and answered no to the question regarding having had sexual intercourse.

⁵ Albert, B (2004). *With one voice 2004: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

Endnotes

¹ Albert, B (2004). *With one voice 2004: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

² Ibid.

³ For those unfamiliar with the term "statistical significance," this refers to the results of statistical testing to measure whether observed differences

Data Source

All statistics for 2002 were generated with data from the National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG), a periodic national survey of fertility-related issues conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). NSFG data sets on CD-ROM are available free of charge from NCHS: visit www.cdc.gov/nchs/nsfg.htm, call (301) 458-4222, or e-mail nsfg@cdc.gov for more information.

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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.