

The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents

Although the proportion of young teens who have had sex and the number who become pregnant has decreased in the past few years, early pregnancy and parenthood remain a concern.¹ Teens who have sex at very young ages are at increased risk of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease (STD). They are also more likely to have an older partner, to have multiple partners, or to have non-voluntary sex. This *Science Says* research brief provides new data on the sexual behavior of young teens and offers recommendations to parents, policymakers, and those working with young teens.

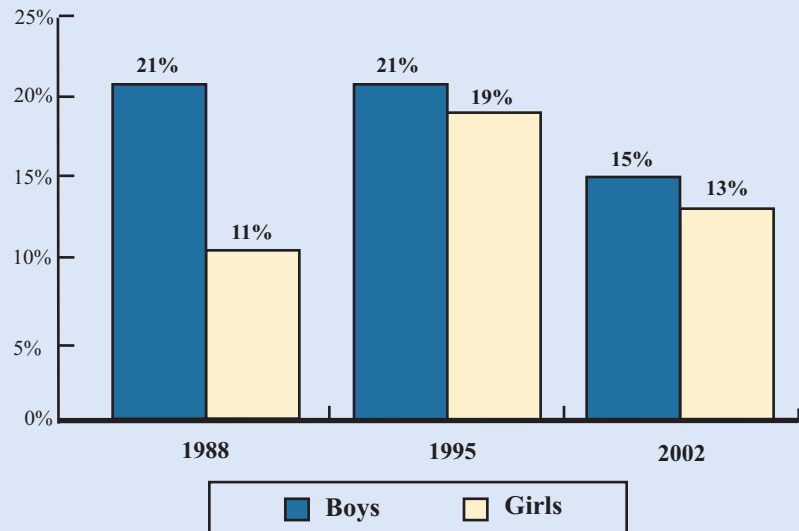
What the Data Show

Sexual Experience

Fewer teens are having sex at a very young age.

- Approximately one in seven teens in the U.S. has sex before age 15 (based on data from the 2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG)).² In 1995, approximately one in five reported having had sex before age 15 (Figure 1).
- According to data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), in 2005, six percent of high school students in the U.S. has sex before the age of 13—a decrease of 39 percent between 1991 and 2005 (Figure 2).³
- Among high school students, there is a stark difference in the proportion of boys (9 percent) and girls (4 percent) who report that they had sex before the age of 13.

FIGURE ONE: Percent of All Never-married Teens Who Had Sex Before Age 15, NSAM and NSFG



Note: Data on teen boys for 1988 and 1995 are from the National Survey of Adolescent Males (NSAM).

- Early sexual initiation is associated with an increased risk of STDs and pregnancy during adolescence.⁴
- Furthermore, most young teens (85 percent of those aged 12-14) themselves say that it is *not* okay for teens in high school to have sex.⁵

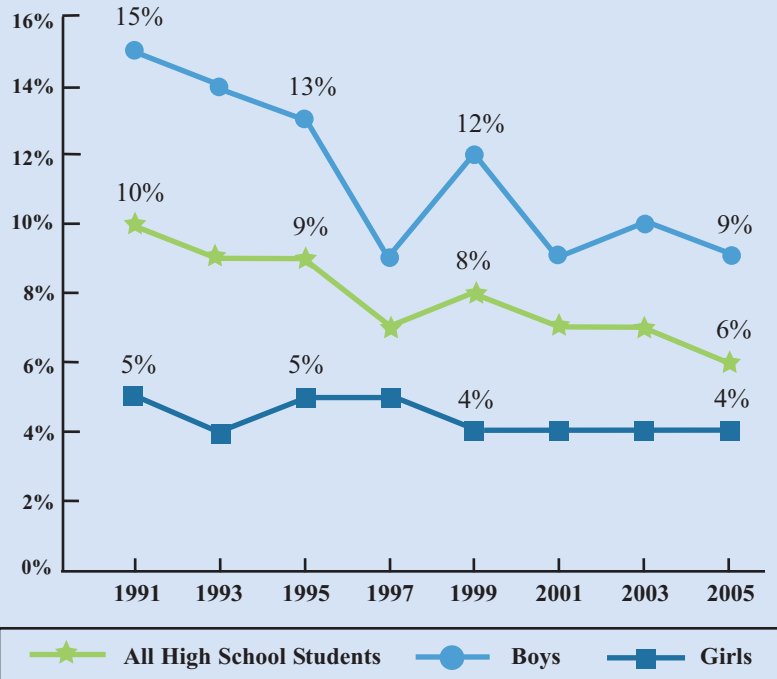
Pregnancy and Births

One in seven sexually experienced young teens (aged 14 and younger) gets pregnant each year.

- Although the number of young adolescents who get pregnant is relatively small, it is a particular concern among *sexually experienced* young teens.
- In fact, approximately one in seven sexually experienced young teens (aged 14 and younger) gets pregnant each year resulting in 17,000 pregnancies and approximately 7,000 births.⁶
- Between 1990 and 2002 (the most recent year data are available), pregnancy rates among those aged 14 and younger decreased 51 percent (from a peak of 17.5 per 1,000 girls in 1990 to 8.6 per 1,000 girls in 2002) (Figure 3).⁶

- In 2004, there were 6,781 births to teen girls under age 15, a birth rate of 0.7 births per 1,000 girls aged 10-14 years.⁷

FIGURE TWO: Percent of *High School Students* Who Had Sex Before Age 13, YRBS

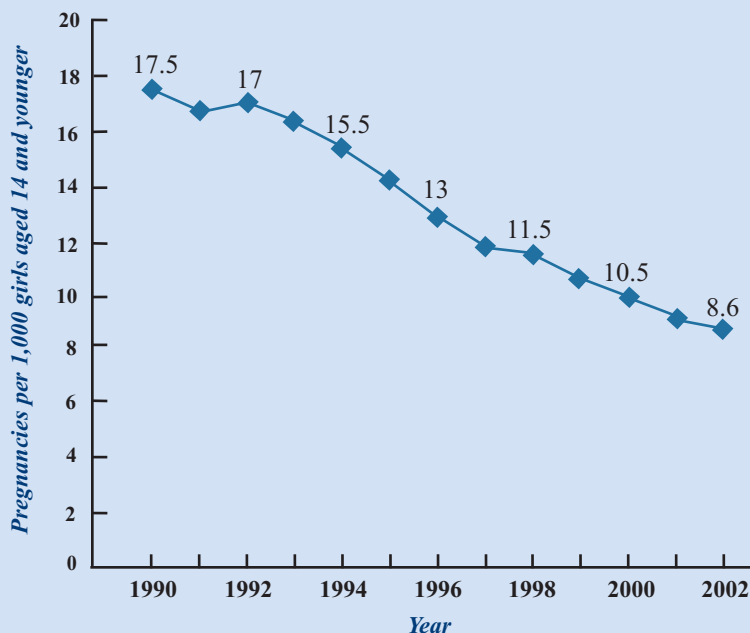


Contraceptive Use

Many sexually experienced young adolescents do not use contraception.

- More than one-third (35 percent) of teen girls who had sex before age 15, did *not* use any contraception the first time they had sex.²
- Other data show that only about half of sexually experienced young teens (aged 12-14) used some form of contraception the *last* time they had sex.⁸
- Teens in relationships who wait longer to have sex or those who discuss contraception before having sex are substantially more likely than their counterparts to ever or to always use contraception.⁹
- As teens' relationships progress and are longer in duration, sexually active teens are more likely to have *ever* used a method of contraception but are less likely to *always* use a method.⁹

FIGURE THREE: Teen Pregnancy Rate Among Girls Aged 14 and Younger, 1990-2002



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Oral Sex

The proportion of young teens who have oral sex is unknown.

- While data clearly indicate that the proportion of teens having sexual intercourse has decreased over the past several years, comparable trend data on oral sex for all teens is limited and is not available at all for young teens.

Pressure

Many young teens described sex as unwanted, and a majority of those who have had sex wish they waited.

- According to data from the NSFG, almost one-fifth of teen girls (18 percent) who had sex before age 15 describe the experience as non-voluntary.² This proportion was similar in both 1995 and 2002.
- In addition, approximately eight in ten teen girls and one in three teen boys who had sex at age 14 or younger report that they either didn't really want to have sex at the time, or had mixed feelings about having sex at the time.²
- Furthermore, according to National Campaign polling data from 2007, two-thirds of sexually experienced teens aged 12-14 wish they had waited longer to have sex.⁵

Dating

The greater the age difference between partners, the greater the likelihood that the relationship includes sexual intercourse.

- Teens who have older partners (two or more years older) are much more likely to be in a relationship that includes sexual intercourse compared to teens who date someone around their own age. In fact, less than one in seven 12-14 year olds (13 percent) who have a partner of a similar age have a relationship that includes sexual intercourse compared to 26 percent of young teens who have a partner two or more years older and one-third of young teens who have a partner three or more years older.¹⁰
- According to data from the 2002 NSFG, nearly four in ten teen girls (37 percent) who first had sex before age 14 had a partner who was four or more years older compared to only 15 percent of girls who first had sex at age 17 or older. In addition, only four percent of girls who had sex before age 14 had a partner the same age.²
- Teens who had an older partner are less likely to consistently use contraception than their peers who had a partner who was a similar age or younger.⁹
- A majority of young teens (61 percent) say it is *not* okay to be in a relationship with someone three or more years older.⁵

Number of Partners

- Teens who initiate sex at a young age are more likely to have a greater number of sexual partners during their lifetime compared to their peers who delay sex. In fact, three in ten teen boys (31 percent) and one-quarter of teen girls (24 percent) who first had sex before the age of 15 report that they had already had 7 or more sexual partners (during their teen years).²

In contrast, almost three-quarters of young teens (72 percent aged 12-14) say that teens should have no sexual partners; approximately 24 percent think that 1-2 partners is acceptable.¹¹

Parents

- Most parents are unaware of whether their young adolescents have had sex. In fact, only about one-third of parents of sexually experienced 14-year-olds believe that their child has had sex.⁸
- Parents can be extremely important when it comes to teens' decisions about sex and a majority of young teens (59 percent) say that their parents have the most influence on their decisions about sex.⁵
- However, parents tend to overestimate whether or not they have had a helpful conversation with their teens about sex—73 percent of young teens say they've had a helpful

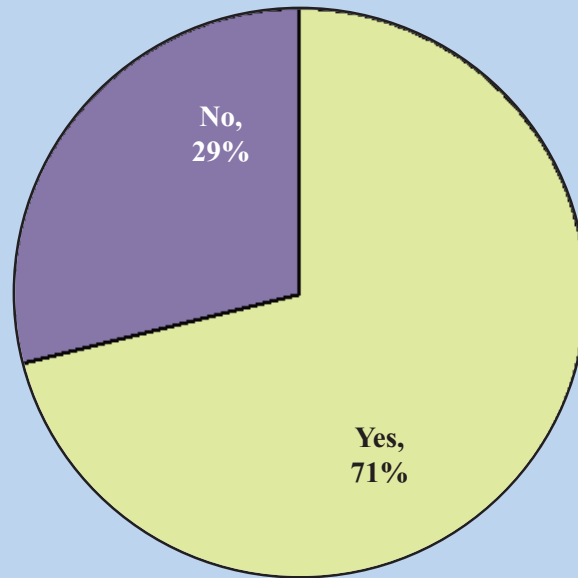
conversation with their parents compared to 89 percent of parents who say they've had a helpful conversation about sex with their teen (Figure 4).⁵

Science-Based Programs to Delay Sexual Initiation

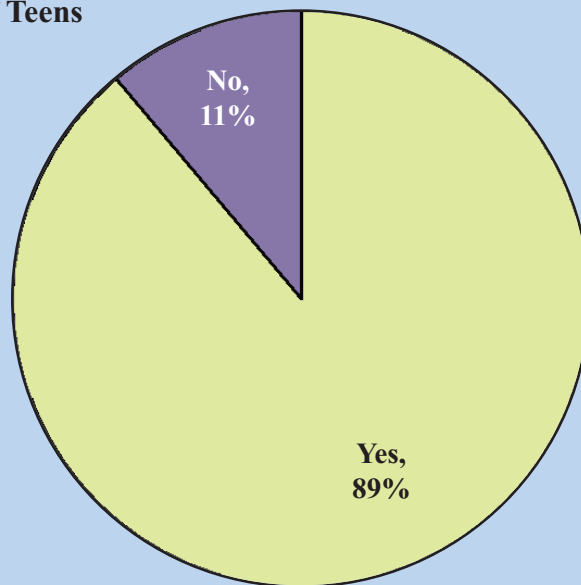
- Thirteen carefully evaluated teen pregnancy prevention programs have been found to delay sexual initiation among the program participants, compared to teens not in the program. A majority of these programs focused on younger teens, usually in a middle school setting.
- The science-based teen pregnancy prevention programs that are effective at delaying sex among young teens include: Draw the Line/Respect the Line; Healthy Oakland Teens; Making a Difference! An Abstinence-Based Approach to HIV/STDs and Teen Pregnancy Prevention; Postponing Sexual Involvement (with both the Human Sexuality and the Health Screening curriculum); Reach for Health Community Youth Service; Rochester AIDS Prevention Project; and Seattle Social Development. For more information on science-based programs please refer to: What Works, Curriculum-Based Programs that Prevent Teen Pregnancy; Emerging Answers 2007; No Time to Waste: Programs to Reduce Teen Pregnancy Among Middle School-Aged Youth; and Not Yet: Programs to Delay First Sex Among Teens, all available at www.teenpregnancy.org.

FIGURE FOUR: Percent of Teens and Parents Who Report That They Have Had a Helpful Conversation with Their Parents/Child about Delaying Sex and Avoiding Teen Pregnancy, 2007

Teens



Parents of Teens



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What It All Means

The proportion of young adolescents who report having sex before age 13 has decreased. For example, fewer high school students reported that they had sex before age 13 in 2005 compared to 2003. Despite dramatic declines in the percent of boys who have had sex before age 13, boys are still more likely than girls to say that they had sex before age 13. This suggests that boys, especially young boys, should continue to be a major focus of pregnancy prevention programs.

There are many reasons to be concerned about early sexual activity. Teens who have sex at a very young age are less likely to use contraception the first time they have sex and are more likely to report that the sex was unwanted compared to teens who waited until they were 15 or older to have sex. In addition, teens who have sex at a young age are more likely to have more lifetime sexual partners and are at increased risk for pregnancy and STDs.

Parents should be concerned about young teenagers dating, particularly dating someone much older. Not surprisingly, young teens who are dating are much more likely to be involved in sexual relationships. If they are dating someone two, three or more years older, they are far more likely to be involved in sexual relationships than those dating someone the same age or slightly older. Parents should discourage early, one-on-one dating, particularly with someone older.

Parents should communicate with their young teens about sex, love, relationships, and values. Evidence suggests that parent/child connectedness (support, closeness, warmth) can play a critical role in delaying first sex among adolescents.

Teaching middle school youth about how to resist and manage sexual pressure is appropriate. Many young teens say they feel pressure to have sex, and might, because of their young age, not be able to handle these situations effectively or appropriately.

Teen pregnancy prevention efforts should include young teens. Data clearly indicate that teen prevention programs for young teens are necessary. These programs will differ from programs for older teens. They should be developmentally appropriate and concretely address issues related to sexual health.

We still have much to learn. Although the information in this research brief sheds some light on the sexual activity of young adolescents, there is still much to learn. For example, while there are more data available for older teens on risky behavior such as oral or anal sex, less is known about these behaviors among young teens. Are teens engaging in these behaviors at increasingly younger ages? Are young teens engaging in these behaviors more frequently and with casual partners? We simply don't know.

The lack of information is due, in part, to concern that asking very young teens questions about sexual behavior will, in fact, increase their interest in having sex. While there is little evidence to support this concern, these sensitivities need to be resolved so that adequate data can be collected to provide sound guidance and advice for those working with young teens.

About Putting What Works To Work

Putting What Works to Work (PWWTW) is a project of the National Campaign 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.

About the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy

The National Campaign's goal is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy for reaching this goal is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

Author Information

This research brief was written by National Campaign staff member Katherine Suellentrop, and National Campaign intern Shana Narula, and designed by staff member Melissa Spindler-Virgin.

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Endnotes

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