



What's It Going to Take?

Extending the Research Base to Improve
Teen Pregnancy Prevention

Executive Summary

September 2007

Report on Findings from the Research Conference Hosted by:
the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy in
collaboration with the Division of Reproductive Health at
the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and
the National Institute for Child Health and
Human Development at NIH.

What's It Going to Take? Summary

Since the early 1990s, teen pregnancy and birth rates have declined substantially, and research has played a valuable role in supporting these declines. Even so, there is much we still don't know. For example, why do some groups of teens remain at increased risk of pregnancy? What else can be done to effectively translate and apply research findings at the community level? New knowledge in these areas has the potential to provide the building blocks necessary to maintain and further the progress the nation has made in reducing teen pregnancy and birth rates.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, in collaboration with the Applied Sciences Branch of the Division of Reproductive Health at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Demographic and Behavioral Sciences Branch of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), convened a 2-day conference March 7-8, 2007 to address some of these questions. The conference—entitled *What's It Going to Take? Extending the Research Base to Improve Teen Pregnancy Prevention*—brought together 75 experts from a variety of research disciplines to discuss key issues in teen pregnancy research, discuss gaps in knowledge, and advance suggestions for a renewed research agenda. This document summarizes some of the key suggestions from the conference. For more detailed information please refer to the full conference report.

Understanding Groups at Highest Risk

To sustain and perhaps accelerate the positive trend of decreasing rates of teen pregnancy and childbearing, we need to better understand the causal factors contributing to the trends, in particular, the modifiable factors leading to high rates of teen pregnancy. We also need to better understand the reasons why some groups of teens, especially African American and Latino teens, are at increased risk of early pregnancy and childbearing. Additional research in the following areas will improve our understanding of teen sexual behavior and of the social and environmental context in which it takes place:

- Identify in greater detail why more teens are delaying sexual activity and why sexually active teens are using more effective contraception methods more consistently.
- Understand the key elements of successful interventions that lead to behavior change, and why interventions are more successful in some population subgroups than in others.
- Explore the impact of immigrant acculturation on pregnancy risk, particularly among Latino teens.

- Develop and use qualitative and ethnographic models to supplement quantitative research, and consider synthesis research that integrates the “macro” and the “micro” levels.

Connecting Childhood Development and Teen Pregnancy

Evidence suggests that family structure and influence, educational opportunities and achievement, and other social factors present at the early stages of life may influence teens' risk of adolescent pregnancy and childbearing later on. For example, child abuse and neglect is a negative childhood experience that has been found to be closely linked to teen pregnancy. Recent research has also provided some neurobiological clues into why many adolescents engage in a host of risky behaviors. Yet, we need further research to incorporate these factors into interventions that foster the development of healthy, risk-reducing social and decision-making skills:

- Better specification of the pathways that link childhood experiences (family, community, school, etc.) to teen pregnancy risk would allow for more precise and effective interventions.
- Better measures of related interim outcomes could be used by youth-serving organizations to justify continued funding for childhood interventions to prevent risky adolescent behavior.
- Better understanding of the effect of childhood sexual abuse on male sexual behavior would provide valuable clues in our efforts to better engage boys and men in pregnancy prevention.
- Further research about how neurological and other developmental processes throughout childhood and adolescence interact around risk-taking behaviors would allow for better targeting of messages and interventions aimed at preventing teen pregnancy.

The World of Teens

Common sense suggests that a deep understanding of the world that teens live in—the nature of their relationships with their peers and their families and the level and content of their media consumption, for example—is important to those who want to help shape adolescent behavior. Yet these are areas of inquiry that remain largely unexplored. Adults and the culture at large offer adolescents numerous and often contradictory messages about sex, relationships, and pregnancy. In addition, media helps shape the social script for adolescents, and it

remains a major conduit for young people to share knowledge, socialize, and to develop and refine their attitudes on a wide variety of topics. In particular, attendees of the research conference suggested the following lines of inquiry:

- Learn more about the specifics of teen culture and the role of peer groups across racial and ethnic groups. Collect qualitative data from young people *themselves* to garner a “real time” look at adolescent culture and its influence.
- Examine couple dynamics—including perceptions of love, definitions of fidelity and consequences of infidelity, and partners’ influences on sexual activity.
- Learn more about the viewing, listening, and reading habits of various teen populations, particularly the exploding popularity of wireless technology and consumer driven content.
- Develop new methods to measure knowledge and impact of teens’ use of new media.
- Develop theoretical frameworks that address the pathways of parental influence for diverse population groups; consider the rapidly changing nature of today’s families.
- Conduct randomized trials of parent-based interventions and studies of innovative outreach to parents and adolescents.

Implementation Research: Increasing Adoption and Quality Implementation of Effective Prevention Programs

The number of effective teen pregnancy prevention interventions and programs has increased over the past decade. Implementation research or science—the scientific study of the process by which research findings and other evidence-based practices are integrated into routine practice—will identify the effective strategies needed to influence the widespread use of available science-based (effective) prevention programs and research. Research of community practitioners’ decisions to adopt, adapt, implement, and evaluate science-based programs will also identify potential systems, organizations, or key community leaders to target in order to increase coverage of effective prevention programming. The experience and research strategies employed in other fields of prevention and public health, such as addiction treatment, violence and drug abuse prevention, and HIV prevention, can help. The gap between science and practice represents a critical research need:

- Explore what factors influence the ability of organizations to adopt science-based preventive interventions. Factors such as policy, funding, organizational functioning, awareness of and access to science-based programs, fit

of these programs with needs of the target population, as well as the influence of key leaders and other decision makers should be explored to identify strategies for increasing adoption.

- Build the evidence base for effective technical assistance and capacity building efforts so that communities and organizations are able to effectively implement science-based interventions or strategies to prevent teen pregnancy and HIV/STI.

Overarching Themes

Several overarching themes emerged from the science conference.

- Include boys and young men in research about sex, pregnancy, and childbearing. Study couples and the dynamics of romantic and sexual relationships—both how they change over the course of adolescence and how they differ across racial and ethnic boundaries.
- Learn more about why young people who are not actively seeking to become pregnant are having sex without using contraception.
- Provide communities with concrete guidance in how to tailor and implement proven interventions that can positively affect teen pregnancy risk.
- Understand the rapidly growing world of technology and its effect on family and adolescent development. Get parents involved, too.
- Finally, and most importantly, talk to teens and work collaboratively with them to develop meaningful pregnancy prevention interventions and approaches.

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