



FAITH MATTERS

**How African-American Faith
Communities Can Help Prevent
Teen Pregnancy**



INTRODUCTION

Religious organizations, faith leaders, youth ministers, and pastors' spouses are in a unique and powerful position to make a difference in preventing teen pregnancy. That's because many teens, like adults, make decisions about their sexual behavior based on religious beliefs, moral values, and their own understanding of family, children, love, and commitment. Research and surveys both show that religious faith and a strong moral sense play important roles in protecting young people from sexual activity and pregnancy in the teen years.

African-American congregations are already working hard to help shape the character of young people and to strengthen families and communities. To enhance these efforts and to highlight the strong connection between faith and preventing teen pregnancy, the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy and the National Coalition of Pastors' Spouses have worked together to develop this pamphlet.

Rates of teen pregnancy and birth have been declining since the early 1990s. These declines have been particularly dramatic among African-American teens. Still, despite this good news, African-American girls are more likely than their White or Hispanic counterparts to become pregnant as a teen. In fact, African-American teens still have the highest teen pregnancy rate of any group. In part because teen pregnancy rates remain stubbornly high in the African-American community, it is our hope that this resource will help African-American congregations, in particular, do more to address the issue of teen pregnancy directly in the context of their rich and diverse religious beliefs.

✦ **One third of African-American teens has had sex by age 15.** ✦

✦ **Rates of teen pregnancy and birth in the African-American community are declining more steeply than U.S. rates overall. In fact, between 1991 and 2002, the African-American teen birth rate dropped 42 percent. Still, nearly six in ten African-American teens get pregnant at least once by age 20.** ✦

WHY PREVENTING TEEN PREGNANCY MATTERS

Teen pregnancy affects overall child and family well-being. In fact, teen pregnancy is closely linked to a host of other critical social issues that burden the African-American community heavily, including welfare dependence, poverty, out-of-wedlock childbearing, education problems, and limited workforce readiness. Consider the following facts:

- ❖ Some 34 percent of African-American teens report they have had sex before age 15 compared to 14 percent of whites and 19 percent of Hispanics.
- ❖ Two-thirds of teen mothers never finish high school and teen fathers are far less likely to complete high school compared to those who delay childbearing until at least age 21.
- ❖ At age 27, 72 percent of African-American girls who first gave birth at age 15 or younger were living in poverty, as were 59 percent of those who first gave birth at ages 16 or 17, compared to 45 percent of those who first gave birth at ages 20-21.
- ❖ Children of teen mothers are 50 percent more likely to repeat a grade, less likely to finish high school, and have lower performance on standardized tests.
- ❖ Nearly all (96 percent) of African American teens aged 15 to 19 who gave birth were unmarried in 2001. Teen mothers who do get married are less likely to stay married than women who wait until they are older to start their families.
- ❖ Children of teen mothers are at great risk for a number of economic, social, and health problems. For example, compared to children with older mothers, they are twice as likely to be abused and neglected, 22 percent more likely to become teen mothers themselves, and 50 percent more likely to have children out-of-wedlock.
- ❖ Those who have sex at an early age are also far more likely than virgins to smoke, drink, and to use drugs. In addition, sex that begins at an early age is associated with more lifetime sexual partners and an increased risk for teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

❖ **Teens cite morals, values, and/or religious beliefs as the factors that *most* affect their decisions about sex.** ❖

YOU MAY BE SURPRISED TO KNOW

Many adults feel powerless to help teenagers, particularly when it comes to the difficult issues of sex, love, and relationships. Parents especially often fear they have already lost their children to the influence of friends and popular culture, and faith leaders are often hesitant to address these issues directly. When asked who most influences their decisions about sex, only six percent of teens said ministers, rabbis, or other religious leaders.

This does not mean that teens and their parents do not want faith leaders involved in this issue—just the opposite is true. Consider the following:

- ❖ An overwhelming majority of teens (72 percent) and adults (75 percent) want *more* involvement from churches and other houses of worship in teen pregnancy prevention.
- ❖ A significant percentage of Americans (39 percent) believe that religious organizations are best suited to address teen pregnancy, with African-American Protestants expressing particular confidence in the role and power of religious organizations.

If you're a virgin, more power to you! I'm a virgin and it's not because I'm unpopular or unpretty. I just know how to put my self-respect, morals, and values before short-term satisfaction.—girl, 17

❖ **Over 90 percent of teens and adults believe that young people should receive a strong abstinence message.** ❖



WHAT TO DO?

Send a clear message. Faith leaders should not be afraid to address sex, love, and relationships directly and in the context of their specific faith traditions. If teen pregnancy is a problem in your community, it needs to be talked about openly and directly. If your local media carries a story about teen pregnancy, faith leaders should address it.

❖ **Teens want other teens to know: “You can always say ‘no,’ even if you’ve said ‘yes’ before.”** ❖

ingly sharing messages on sex, love, and relationships from the pulpit and through youth-serving ministries and activities. Faith traditions can have a strong impact on helping teens avoid sexual activity and pregnancy before marriage, but messages need to be consistent, direct, and precise. In other words: Tell it like it is!

Recommending no is not enough. If you believe that young people should delay sexual activity, you need to let them know *why*. For example, make sure that young people know that abstinence is the only certain way to avoid sexually transmitted diseases and teen pregnancy. Clearly explain how sex at an early age can lead to pregnancy and parenthood, which can get in the way of future goals. Other reasons to delay sexual involvement include increased time for spiritual and emotional development and to complete education.

Set high standards. Working together, faith leaders, families, and communities should set high standards and expectations for teens, allowing them the opportunity to rise to the challenge.

Help teens find answers to their questions. It is during the teenage years that many young people first struggle with some of the most important questions of life, and the intensity and urgency of these questions can be very powerful to them. Many teens hunger for a framework of values and faith that can help them make moral decisions and manage the everyday pressures from friends that can be so stressful in these transition years. Teens want help in seeing beyond the present moment. Faith leaders, youth ministers, pastors’ spouses and others are uniquely able to provide the spiritual guidance so many teenagers crave with

Let them know where you stand. Young people need to know and emphatically understand where your faith tradition stands on matters such as sex, abstinence, and families. Most faith traditions advocate abstinence until marriage. If yours does, say that to your youth. Faith leaders are increas-

I don’t really care what people say; right now, sex just isn’t worth it.—girl, 17

energy, conviction and commitment. For example, faith leaders can provide support to those young people who make a commitment to resist pressure and remain abstinent, understanding how hard it is in modern America to say “no” and stick to it.

✦ **Nearly two-thirds of young people aged 12–19 who have had sex wish they had waited.** ✦

Get parents involved. Many parents are uncomfortable talking with their children about sex. This is not unusual, but it is unfortunate since parents are children’s first and most significant teachers about values and moral expectations. The church is an ideal place to encourage parents to talk with their children about sex, love, relationships, and values, specifically, and to be closely connected with their children more generally. Use the power of the pulpit to deliver a “parent power” message or consider sponsoring workshops for parents about how to talk with their children about critical topics such as abstinence and the importance of conveying clear values and expectations.

Get others in the faith community to help. Teenagers develop character and personal values through interacting with respected and empathetic adults. Sometimes faith leaders themselves are available to work directly with teenagers, but often they carry so many responsibilities that they need help from others. If this is the case, ask highly trusted and knowledgeable adults in your faith community for help. Whether the adults create an organized mentoring program or something more informal, be sure they understand teenagers and can talk about values and relationships within the context of your faith’s principles.

L.I.S.T.E.N.

Learn about the contemporary youth culture and the influence of the entertainment media. **I**nvestigate what young people are reading, and watching. Know their music and its lyrics. **S**top and observe what youth are doing and who they are doing it with. **G**et to know their friends and their friends’ parents. **T**alk to teens—they want to hear from you and it helps you better understand their concerns. **E**ncourage young people to ask questions—both at church and at home—and discuss the sexual feelings and pressures they face. **N**ever condemn adolescents for their ideas or opinions. Instead of lectures, offer young people two-way, respectful conversations and let them know you are an “askable” adult. Also, don’t be afraid to let them know what you think and why. Have a point of view.

Give youth something to say “yes” to. Research supports what common sense suggests—now more than ever, teens need to be involved in constructive, supervised activities. Religious communities should provide wholesome activities for youth to say “yes” to, especially when we are asking them to say “no” to

sexual activity and pregnancy. The activities that you sponsor for young people—from “rites of passage” programs to prayer circles to field trips—are all excellent opportunities for fostering fellowship and supportive friendships.

Don’t forget those young people *not* in church. Reach out to other neighborhood teens by offering structured youth programs in your church. These young people may be seeking answers and guidance on spiritual issues and need only for someone to reach out and provide them with support. Encourage youth ministry leaders to host discussions or “speak outs” with young people on a regular basis. Add topics such as abstinence, sexual behavior, consequences, prevention, and healthy relationships as part of the curriculum.

Celebrate achievement and excellence. Encourage educational achievement by organizing tutoring, homework assistance, and opportunities for community service. Encourage or offer scholarships for college and vocational training.

Celebrate spiritual and non-academic achievement as well, like volunteer work or excellence in the arts. Consider recognition ceremonies during regular worship services or designate specific days each year to honor teenagers for their accomplishments in a wide range of areas. Give the teenagers in your faith community a place to shine—no matter what their abilities or interests.

✧ **Eight out of ten young people aged 12–19 believe that sex should only occur in a long-term, committed relationship.** ✧


Partner with other faith communities and organizations that serve youth. Partnerships can make a real difference in preventing teen pregnancy. Collaborate with other faith communities, churches, neighborhood organizations, and institutions such as the NAACP, National Urban League, YMCAs and YWCAs, National Coalition of 100 Black Women, Boys and Girls Clubs, Jack and Jill, fraternities and sororities, libraries, and recreation centers that work with young people. Consider coordinating with other youth ministries in your area to send a strong and consistent message about the importance of preventing teen pregnancy.

Boredom may not be the best reason, but it is probably one of the most common reasons. . . . If towns had more things to do and places to go for teens, then I am sure that the sexual activity rates would go down.—girl, 17

FINALLY

As noted previously, there is much good news to report. Teen sexual activity is on the decline, as are rates of teen pregnancy and birth. The news is particularly encouraging in the African American community where rates of teen pregnancy and birth are decreasing faster than U.S. rates overall. For example, the African-American teen birth rate dropped *42 percent* (between 1991 and 2002) compared to 27 percent for the entire population.

Clearly, progress can be made on what many considered to be an “unfixable” problem. Still, despite these encouraging statistics, rates of teen pregnancy in this country remain unacceptably high — and among African-Americans, the rates are highest of all. Continued progress is unlikely if we begin to believe that the problem of teen pregnancy has been solved. Pastors, youth leaders, pastors’ spouses and other faith leaders are on the front line: **activate your church and community!**



THE
NATIONAL
CAMPAIGN TO
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY
TEENPREGNANCY.ORG

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About us:

The National Coalition of Pastors’ Spouses is a nonprofit, nonpartisan network of multi-denominational pastors’ spouses committed to addressing health and social disparities that disproportionately affect African American communities.

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization whose mission is to improve the well-being of children, youth, and families by reducing teen pregnancy.

For more information:

For more information, please visit our websites: www.pastorspouses.com, or www.teenpregnancy.org or call NCPS at 866.35-GO-MRS (866.354-6677) or NCPTP at 202.478-8500. This pamphlet is based, in part, on the National Campaign publication, *Nine Tips to Help Faith Leaders and Their Communities Address Teen Pregnancy*. To read or order copies of *Nine Tips*, please go visit www.teenpregnancy.org.

