

It Takes a Village

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When I was first asked to write an essay about preventing teen pregnancy, I thought they had come to the wrong person. First off, if you had known me back when I was in school, you would realize the word “essay” would send chills down my spine. Also, I’ve got no teenagers and the ones I did have were boys. But I agreed to write this essay for two reasons: (1) This essay will not be graded, and (2) I’ve read the statistics about teenage pregnancy and remembered that even though it’s the teenage young lady who gets pregnant and has the baby, it’s the teenage young man who gets her there and it’s the responsibility of the boy, the girl, their parents, their church members, their teachers, and everyone else who cares about them to help prevent that from happening. Like the African proverb, “It Takes a Village to Raise a Child,” it also “Takes a Village to Help Teens Prevent Unplanned Pregnancy.”

But before we discuss finding a solution to this problem, let’s discuss why it’s a problem in the first place. The most obvious to me is that if teenagers are getting pregnant they’re having unprotected sex — and with HIV/AIDS virus reaching record proportions in the African-American community — that’s a major concern. If our teenagers are not getting the message that having unprotected sex can lead, not just to pregnancy, but to diseases and possibly death, you would think would be enough — but it isn’t.

There's nothing more precious than a baby, and who's to say that a child born to unwed teenage parents won't grow up to do something great? But all we need to do is look at some of the statistics, or better yet, look in your school, your church, your community, and maybe your own home, and you can figure that in most cases the struggle is greater for teen moms and dads, and their children are then more likely to grow up in single-parent homes themselves. This is not a put-down of single moms or single dads, who have beaten the odds, raised wonderful families, and are doing their thing. But those who aren't as fortunate live in poverty and are more likely to get involved in gang activity and be victims of domestic abuse and other acts of violence. These are just the facts.

So, if you are a teen or have influence over one, abstinence is the first order of business...but based on what kids are exposed to on TV and the internet...heck...on the school yard...good luck with that! Another way to go is to catch the kids before they're even considering sexual activity and get them involved in positive programs that keep their minds and bodies occupied.

Start talking to your kids early about not just what they want to be when they become adults, but who they want to be. What does their future look like to them right now?

I'd be willing to bet that becoming a single parent isn't in their game plan. But they're children and teens and they need the guidance of responsible parents and other adults to help them stay focused on their dreams and to remind them that certain behaviors, like unprotected sex, are the surest way to send them down a different path. You can only do that, adults, if you're vigilant, sober, and present. Yes, I'm calling out. A lot of parents find themselves becoming unplanned grandparents because they are too busy living

their lives to make the sacrifices that aid in preventing teenage pregnancy. If you're attending parent-teacher conferences, showing up at their events, cheering them on, meeting their friends, chaperoning them on dates, and being the kinds of parents that your kids enjoy being around, your child will be more likely to make the right choices in life. Statistics show that girls and boys who have both parents in their lives tend to fare better than those from single-parent homes. Girls with good relationships with their fathers or other males they're related to — not their mom's boyfriends — have higher self-esteem and girls with high self-esteem have lower instances of teen pregnancy.

In a perfect world, there would be a perfect formula we could follow that would guarantee that if we did everything right none of our children or grandchildren would have an unplanned pregnancy. Unfortunately, no such formula exists. All we can do is do our best to teach our kids the most moral and safest ways to prevent having babies before they're ready physically, mentally, and financially.

As a parent, the one thing I know I did right was invest early in the education of my boys and let them know early and often that I expected and required them to graduate from high school and the Historically Black College or University of their choice. We talked about their future, and by the time they were teenagers both my boys had pictures in their heads of themselves attending college. It's never too early to begin taking your children on college tours, putting them on mailing lists to receive information about colleges, and giving them a mental imprint of how good their lives can be down the line.

Every year the *Tom Joyner Morning Show* celebrates "Take a Loved One to the Doctor Day," and so I've got making healthy living choices on my mind. Planned pregnancies lead to healthier

babies, healthier children, healthier financial pictures, and healthier futures. The alternative is much gloomier and it takes a village to prevent it from happening.

Tom Joyner is founder of REACH Media Inc., the Tom Joyner Foundation, BlackAmericaWeb.com, and host of the leading nationally syndicated morning radio show, The Tom Joyner Morning Show. His daily program, The Tom Joyner Morning Show, is syndicated across the United States and heard by more than ten million radio listeners. Joyner was inducted in the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame at the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site on January 12, 2008.