Sex and Young Adolescents

When it comes to young adolescents and sex, what are we to believe? Are young persons a willing part of the hang-out, hook-up culture detailed so breathlessly and frequently in the media? Or are we to believe the headline from the New York Times in 2004: “Sex Doesn’t Sell, Miss Prim Is In”?

Anecdotal information suggests that relationships are out, friends with benefits are in, and that oral sex is as casual as a hug. On the other hand, teen pregnancy and birth rates, particularly among young adolescents, have declined dramatically since the early 1990s, indicating that teens are waiting until they are older before having sex.

What gives? It seems that the truth is somewhere in the middle and apparently the world of young adolescents and sex does not easily lend itself to a summary headline. Beginning at a very early age, young people are learning to navigate a peer culture that has both sexual “players” and virginity “pledgers.”

Sexual Attitudes and Behavior

Compared with young people who delay sexual activity, those who begin having sex at an early age are more likely to have a greater number of sexual partners over time, are at increased risk of both teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, and are more likely to describe their first sexual experience as unwanted.

Although most young teens have not had sex, for a significant minority sex doesn’t wait. About one in seven young people have sex before they reach age 15. And while the number of young adolescents who get pregnant is relatively small, approximately one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls say they have been pregnant. This translates into about 20,000 pregnancies each year and approximately 8,000 births. These data suggest that we need to rethink our beliefs that high school is the right time to start being concerned about kids and their sexual behavior.

What Can Schools Do?

Connection to school matters. The link between school and young teens’ sexual behavior is quite strong. Teens who do well academically in school, are happy to be there, and feel close to people there are far more likely to delay sexual activity and avoid early pregnancy and parenthood than teens lacking such close connections. In fact, school failure is often the first sign of advanced risk for pregnancy at a young age.

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Schools can help strengthen young people’s motivation to delay sex and avoid early pregnancy by promoting educational success, working with parents to set high expectations for school performance, and helping young people develop skills for the future and a strong sense of purpose.

Expand activities offered during and after school. Involving teens in constructive extracurricular activities seems to promote responsible sexual behavior. Community service activities, mentoring, and tutoring have all shown great promise in encouraging responsible sexual behavior among young people.

Let teens know the real deal. What teens think their peers are doing—or not doing—also matters. Many consistently overestimate the proportion of their peers who have had sex. Help teens understand that not everybody is “doing it” and that many sexually active teens wish they had waited longer.

Help parents understand their influence. When it comes to teens and sex, many parents tend to throw in the towel. Yet two decades of data make clear that parents need to know that when it comes to young people’s decisions about sex, their influence has not been lost to peers and popular culture.

Schools can help close the “parent-teen gap” by promoting the value of communication. They need to reassure parents that talking with their children, beginning at a young age, on topics as sensitive as sex, love, and relationships is important, if not easy.

Sex Education

There is a growing body of high-quality research that provides guidance toward what works in curriculum-based sex education programs. Effective programs tend to:

- Provide clear messages about sex and contraception;
- Have a narrow focus on specific behavioral goals, such as delaying first sex;
- Address peer pressure;
- Teach communication skills;
- Include interactive activities;
- Reflect the age, sexual experience, and culture of the young people in the program; and
- Carefully select and train leaders.

It is unreasonable to expect schools alone to shoulder the entire burden of sex education for teens. Moreover, putting the complex issues of sex, love, relationships, and values in a context each family prefers is a task far beyond the scope of educators. However, there is much that schools can do to help young adolescents avoid too-early sex, pregnancy, and parenthood. For more information, visit www.teenpregnancy.org.

Bill Albert is the senior communications director for the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. His e-mail address is balbert@teenpregnancy.org.