



THE  
NATIONAL  
CAMPAIGN TO  
PREVENT TEEN PREGNANCY

CELEBRATING A DECADE OF PROGRESS  
IN IMPROVING THE LIVES OF CHILDREN,  
YOUTH AND FAMILIES

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## Sexual Attitudes and Behavior of Young Adolescents

There is reason to be concerned about adolescents having sex at an early age. Early sexual activity has been linked to a greater number of sexual partners over time and an increased risk of both teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In addition, the younger a girl is the first time she has sex, the more likely it is that the experience was unwanted.<sup>1</sup> The information in this fact sheet, collected from nationally representative data sets and public opinion surveys, provides some insights into the sexual attitudes and behavior of young adolescents.

### **2002 National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) Data**

The data presented in this section is from the NSFG (except where noted), a periodic survey of adolescents conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Center of Health Statistics.

- **Pregnancy.** While the number of young adolescents who get pregnant is relatively small, a significant percentage of young adolescents who are *sexually experienced* reports having been pregnant. Approximately one in seven sexually experienced 14-year-old girls reports having been pregnant. That translates into about 20,000 pregnancies each year and approximately 8,000 births.<sup>2</sup>
- **Declines.** Between 1990 and 1999, teen pregnancy rates declined 27% for those aged 15-19. For those 14 and under, the teen pregnancy rate declined 40% (from a peak in 1990 of 17.5 per 1,000 girls to 10.5).<sup>3</sup>
- **Teens are waiting longer before having sex.** In 2002 13 percent of teen girls and 15 percent of teen boys reported having had sex before age 15 (down from 19 percent and 21 percent respectively in 1995).
- **This reverses a trend.** The 1995 NSFG survey noted that while the proportion of unmarried teen girls aged 15-19 who had sex declined between 1988 and 1995, the proportion of unmarried teen girls under age 15 who had sex actually *increased* from 11 percent to 19 percent.

- **Non-voluntary.** A significant proportion (18 percent) of those teens who first had sex by age 14 describe it as not voluntary. An additional third of those who first had sex by age 14 report that they “didn’t really want it to happen at the time” or “had mixed feelings” about the experience.
- **Older partners.** One quarter (24 percent) of teen girls who first had sex by age 15 report that their male partner was at least four years older. About two-thirds (66 percent) say their male partner was 1-3 years older.
- **Characterizing relationships.** The overwhelming majority (64%) of teen girls who first had sex by age 14 say there were “going steady” with their male partner. One quarter (24 percent) of teen girls who first had sex by age 14 report that they “just met” or were “just friends” with their male partner.
- **Number of partners.** Nearly six in ten (57 percent) of those teens who first had sex before age 15 report having had four or more sexual partners by age 19.
- **Contraceptive use.** Teens who have sex at an early age are less likely than older teens to use contraception the first time they have sex. One third of teen girls (35%) and one quarter of teen boys (24%) who first had sex by age 14 report they didn’t use *any* contraception the first time they had sex.
- **Sex education.** Most teens report getting sex education by age 15. About nine in ten (91% of girls and 86% of boys) say they received formal instruction in school about “how to say no to sex” by age 15. About six in ten teen boys and girls report they received formal instruction on “methods of birth control” by age 15.

#### **National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy public opinion polling 2004**

Each year, the National Campaign publishes nationally-representative data based on answers from adults and teens aged 12-19. The results presented here provide a nationally-representative snapshot of teens aged 12-14.

- **Sex.** Younger teens (85%) are much more likely than older teens (59%) to disapprove of high school age teens having sex.
- **Partners.** Young teens (72 percent) are also far more likely than older teens (45 percent) to say it is inappropriate for teens to have *any* sexual partners. One-quarter of young teens say one or two sexual partners is “okay.”
- **Relationships.** Nine in ten young teens (89 percent) believe that sex should only occur in a long-term, committed relationship.
- **Abstinence.** Almost all young teens (97 percent) surveyed believe it is important for teens to be given a strong message from society that they should not have sex until they are at least out of high school.
- **Information.** Eight in ten young teens (81%) say they wish they were getting more information about abstinence and contraception, rather than either/or. Only two percent of young teens say teens get *enough* information about abstinence and contraception.
- **Mixed message?** Two thirds of young teens (66%) say that encouraging them to delay sexual activity while also providing them information about contraception does *not* send them a confusing, mixed message or encourage them to have sex.
- **Parents.** Teens in general—and young teens in particular—say that parents *most* influence their decisions about sex.
- **Communication.** Nine in ten young teens (91 percent) go on to say that it would be much easier for teens to delay sex and avoid teen pregnancy if they were able to have

more open, honest conversations about these topics with their parents. However, four in ten young teens say they have not had a single such conversation with their parents.

- **Regret.** Seven in ten sexually experienced young teens (71 percent) say they wish they had waited longer before having sexual intercourse.
- **Messages for boys.** Over half of young teens in general (54 percent)—and about half of young teen boys in particular (47 percent)—say teen boys often receive the message that sex and pregnancies are not a big deal.
- **Messages for girls.** About half of young teens in general (52 percent)—and over half of young teen girls in particular (56 percent)—believe that teen girls often receive the message that attracting boys and looking sexy is one of the most important things they can do.

### **NBC/People public opinion polling 2004**

The results presented in this section are from a nationally representative survey of teens aged 13-16 conducted in 2004.

- **Casual sexual relationship.** Few young teens (8 percent) report having had a “casual” sexual relationship. Girls are just as likely to have had a casual sexual relationship as boys. Nearly half (48 percent) of young teens who have had a casual sexual relationship say they did so to “avoid the complications of a serious relationship.”
- **Oral sex.** Few young teens (12 percent) report having had oral sex. Three quarters (77 percent) of young teens classify oral sex as “sex;” over half of young teens (55 percent) believe that it is “very important” to be in love before having oral sex; and more than two-thirds of young teens disapprove of young teens having oral sex.
- **Oral sex and virginity.** More than half of young teens (54 percent) believe that teens who only engage in oral sex are still considered virgins.
- **Why are teens having oral sex?** When asked why teens have oral sex, 21 percent said to be more popular or accepted, 76 percent said they did so because their partner wanted to, 68 percent said so they didn’t have to worry about pregnancy, 64 percent cited curiosity, and about half (49 percent) say they had oral sex so they could remain virgins.

### **For more information:**

- For more information about teen pregnancy and young adolescents, please visit the National Campaign’s website—[www.teenpregnancy.org](http://www.teenpregnancy.org).
- Visit <http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/04news/teens.htm> for more information about the NSFG.
- Visit <http://people.aol.com/people/teensex/teensexpoll.pdf> for more information on the NBC/People magazine poll.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert, B., Brown, S., & Flanigan, C. (Eds.) (2003). *14 and Younger: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*. Washington, DC: National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.

<sup>2</sup> *Science Says: The Sexual Behavior of Young Adolescents*. (2004). National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy. Washington, DC: Author.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.